

165: Shake

Early in the morning, just after sixth bell, Rain sat beside Ameliah at a small table in the tavern, tucked away in the corner. It was one of the few that remained, the majority of the space occupied by row after row of bedrolls, emptying now as people rose to begin their day. Across from Rain and Ameliah sat Jamus and Carten, just off their watch, and the four of them were presently sharing a quiet conversation as the noise of the camp grew around them. Seeing Jamus look up at someone behind him, Rain turned his head, then blinked in recognition. "Oh, hi Lana, what—"

He broke off as the former washerwoman removed a metal plate from the tray she was carrying. "Captain," she said respectfully, placing the plate in front of him. On it rested a thick slice of buttered bread, a pair of sliced hard-boiled eggs, and four thick slabs of Emouile bacon, which was almost as good as the real thing. Beside the plate, Lana placed a steaming mug, the aroma of fresh coffee wafting from it enticingly.

"Oi!" Carten said, pointing rudely. "Where's mine?"

"In the kitchen, oaf," Lana said, looking at him as she placed a second plate in front of Ameliah. "If you get in line now, there might even be some eggs left."

"You didn't have to do this, Lana," Ameliah said as Carten spluttered. Jamus began to laugh, laying a hand on Carten's shoulder to hold him in his seat.

"I wanted to," Lana said, tucking the tray she'd used to carry the plates under her arm. She turned to Rain, then bowed. "Thanks to you, I have a place here. This was the least I could do."

"I—" Rain began, then hesitated. He looked down at his breakfast, his mouth already watering. He looked back up. "Thanks, really, this looks amazing, but I don't— Amelia's right. We could have gotten our own breakfast, just like everyone else."

Lana smiled. "Don't be daft. You're the captain. You have better things to be doing than waiting in line. Anyway, I have to go. I'm on Samson's patrol this morning, and he doesn't like it when people are late."

Rain nodded slowly, realizing only now that Lana was wearing armor, not regular clothing. It looked like Emouile leather, possibly from the same monster that had been turned into the bacon before him. It was finely tailored, too—at least, compared to the first sets Ascension had been making. She also had a sword hanging from her waist, but he didn't get a good look at it before he was distracted by Tarny, who was approaching with another tray.

Tarny nodded to Rain, coming to a stop beside Lana. "Captain." He looked down at the table, frowning. "It appears that I was too slow."

"Lucky!" Carten said, standing and reaching over the table, snagging a pair of plates before Tarny could snatch the tray away.

"Carten," Jamus said scoldingly. "That isn't for you."

"Oh, stuff it," Carten said, depositing a plate in front of the orange-robed mage. "Here."

Rain smiled, taking a sip from his mug. He grimaced, then quickly tried to hide it. *Depths below!*

"Here," Ameliah said, taking the mug from his hand and swapping it with hers. She'd just taken a sip herself and was making a face like a husky confronted with a stalk of broccoli.

"Oh no!" Lana said, looking between them as Rain fought not to laugh. "I'm so sorry. I must have gotten them mixed up."

"Don't worry about it," Ameliah said, taking a sip from Rain's mug. She sighed in contentment. "That's much better. Maybe just a touch more honey next time."

"More?" Rain asked, incredulous. "Are you insane?"

"Quiet, you," Ameliah said, taking another sip. "Eat your bacon."

"In the middle is right for me," Jamus said, busy pouring coffee between two mugs like a bartender making a mixed drink. Finishing, he slid one of them in front of Carten, then took a sip from the other. "Ahh, perfect. Not too sweet, not too bitter."

"Keep yer horse drop water," Carten said, pushing the mug back. "No matter how much honey ye put, I ain't drinkin' steamin' ass juice."

Rain snorted mid-sip and barely stopped himself from spraying everyone at the table.

"I really should be going," Lana said, smiling as Ameliah patted Rain's back.

"Go ahead," Rain managed once he recovered. "Thanks again for breakfast, and really, you didn't have to. If Samson's mad at you for being late, just blame me."

Lana smiled. "Samson doesn't really get mad, though. He just gives you this sort of disappointed look."

"We wouldn't want that," Ameliah said with a smile, catching Carten's hand as it crept toward her plate. "You'd better go on. And thank you."

"You're very welcome," Lana said, nodding and moving away.

A deep rumble made Rain jump.

"Depths!" Tarny cried, jumping and almost dropping the tray. He set it down on the table, then pressed a hand to his chest. "Don't do that!"

"Is that *eshad*?" Tallheart asked mildly, peering over the much shorter man's shoulder.

Rain grinned, then looked at the tray, curious to see what *eshad* might be. There was a bowl there holding a lightly-charred tumble of greens that looked vaguely like spinach, drizzled with a reddish sauce with black flecks. It smelled peppery and a bit sour.

"Well, at least I don't need to go looking for you now," Tarny said, turning and craning his neck upward. "Yes, it's *eshad*, but I make no promises. Cervidian recipes are quite hard to find, especially the ones that disagree with humans."

"Hmm," Tallheart said. He stuck a finger in the sauce, then into his mouth, then considered for a moment before picking up a fork and taking a proper bite of the greens. He chewed slowly, and after a long, breathless moment, nodded. "Passable." He turned to Tarny, then smiled one of his barely-perceptible smiles. "Thank you. I appreciate this. Hmm. I will get myself a chair."

Rain beamed as Tarny melted in relief, taking a bite of his bacon. Jamus was busy fending off Carten. The turtle had finished his own plate and was presently trying to filch one of Jamus's eggs. Tallheart returned with a chair, and Tarny made way. He moved to stand at Rain's elbow, then cleared his throat.

"Captain, I have your agenda for you, if now is a good time?"

"Sure, why not," Rain said, picking up his fork once more. He gestured with it. "Get yourself a chair, though. We'll make room so you don't have to hover. You're making me feel awkward. Like I told Lana, I don't want to be waited on or served or any of that nonsense."

Tarny opened his mouth to say something, but seemed to reconsider. He finally nodded, moving away to grab a chair. Ameliah shifted closer to Rain to make room, and taking advantage of her new position, moved in to kiss the side of his neck.

"What was that for?" Rain asked, smiling and turning to look at her.

"Do I need a reason?" Ameliah asked innocently.

Rain smiled. "I suppose you don't." He leaned in to kiss her properly, but the moment their lips made contact, he pulled away sharply, making a face. "Ugh. Honey coffee."

Ameliah snorted, chasing after his retreating lips. He let her catch them, and this time, didn't pull away. They did break apart after a moment, though, being in public and all.

Tarny cleared his throat awkwardly, and Rain laughed, seeing that Carten was giving him and Ameliah a double thumbs up. Jamus was likewise smiling, mild surprise on his face.

"I've been training him," Ameliah said, gesturing to Rain as she settled back into her chair.

"Look. No red."

Rain rolled his eyes, placing his hand on her armored knee and giving it a friendly squeeze.

"Go ahead, Tarny. Let's have it."

Tarny nodded. "Yes, sir. Firstly, I have left your morning free, as you asked. Then, at first bell, Romer is holding a literacy lecture. He has requested that you sit in on it so the students can benefit from Winter. At second bell, you and Tallheart are meeting with the Engineering Council to discuss 'replaceable parts,' whatever that means. Staavo wished me to tell you that if you're going to call a meeting with a vague topic, he would appreciate it if you could not. His words."

"I would also appreciate that," Tallheart said through a mouthful of greens.

"You'll both find out," Rain said, smiling. "Explaining what it means is what the meeting is for. Go on, Tarny."

"At third bell, you and Ameliah have an appointment with Aspirant Dempton to take your measurements. Myth and Reason have already started on the fabric."

"What fabric is this, now?" Ameliah asked. "Who is Aspirant Dempton?"

"Forceweave, for the suits Rain has requested for the both of you," Tarny replied. "Aspirant Dempton is a tailor from Vestvall. He seems to be quite skilled, though I am no judge. Vestvalla fashion is...interesting." He glanced at Jamus, who smiled, then made a show of tipping his hat.

Rain laughed as Ameliah nodded. "Okay, what's next?"

"Nothing for a few hours, though there are a number of petitioners you might wish to talk to. At fifth bell, I have arranged for a meal with all of the council heads, followed by a discussion concerning the larger plans for the crack and the evacuation."

"Good, good," Rain said, taking a deep breath. "Anything after that?"

Tarny shook his head. "As you said, that discussion might take some time, so I didn't put anything after it."

Rain nodded. "Good."

"If I might ask," Tarny said, hesitating. "Why did you request your morning to be left free? I could have arranged for the council heads to meet earlier in that case. It is an important topic."

"It is," Rain agreed, nodding. "I just have something more important to do first." He smiled at Ameliah. "How would you like to join me on a date?"

Ameliah sighed, squeezing Rain's arm, looped through her own. "This is so romantic."

Rain laughed, squeezing back. The pair of them were walking through Vestvall, or its ruins, more like. The city had seen better days, to be sure. He'd never visited before on account of his soul, but from what he'd heard, it had been a lot better than this. Now, most buildings had either been torn down or gutted, and there were piles of scrap wood lying everywhere, waiting to be burned. Ahead, an earthen wall much like the one surrounding Ascension's camp marked the start of what would have been the noble quarter. It wasn't terribly high, but it was enough to prevent them from seeing anything inside other than rooftops. A dozen-odd townsfolk could be seen atop those and along the battlements, holding bows and watching their approach with clear alarm.

Rain couldn't really blame them for that, given the current tensions between Ascension and the city's remaining inhabitants. Both he and Ameliah were fully armored, including their helmets, but they'd made a point to wear their Guild plates out in the open—his bronze, hers silver, naturally. He also had his Custodian's plate on display, which would settle any doubts as to his identity. That being threat enough, Rain had insisted that they remain unarmed. They'd even removed their cloaks and pouches, removing the possibility of concealed weapons, not that they needed any. The gesture was symbolic, more than anything. Vestvall didn't boast any awakened beyond low-bronze. Vanna had briefed him yesterday, and he wasn't concerned.

"You owe me a real date after this," Ameliah said, bringing Rain's attention back to her.

Rain chuckled. "Obviously. Maybe there's a nice lake around here or something. We could take a day off once we've dealt with Mayor Graymond and figured out whether we're staying or going."

"Mmm," Ameliah said. "A lake sounds nice. I'd settle for a quiet evening where you tell me how *The Hobbit* ends."

Rain blinked. *Shit. I totally forgot about that.*

Ameliah laughed at his expression. "I'm a patient woman, but even I have my limits."

"Yeah, yeah," Rain said, distracted by a splotch of color in the ruins. It was a sign, standing, though the building behind it had collapsed. It depicted a slice of pie, oozing purple filling, resting on a plate beside a mug of beer. Below the image were the words 'Half-Pint Bakery' in fancy script.

"Damn," Ameliah said, following his gaze. "I was looking forward to trying one of those pies."

Rain patted her hand consolingly. "There's still hope. For all we know, the owners already joined Ascension and we just haven't met them yet. That, or they're in there." He nodded toward the wall ahead of them. The third alternative, he left unsaid. One in four people in Vestvall hadn't survived the night of the Shift. It wasn't a happy thought.

Passing the sign, Rain and Ameliah walked on for a few more moments before they came to a stop in front of the barricade. More sentries had appeared up on the wall, and they'd all nocked arrows. Rain frowned, seeing that, then waved up to them in greeting. "I'm here to see the mayor. Can I come in?"

The sentries looked at each other uneasily. After a moment, and after some elbowing from his colleagues, one of them raised a hand, signaling Rain and Ameliah to wait. He looked over his shoulder nervously, then back at them and licked his lips.

Rain's frown deepened. *What has the mayor been telling them about us?*

To say that things were tense between Vestvall and Ascension was putting it mildly. The nobility had holed themselves up in the fortifications Ameliah had helped them construct, along with a good number of working-class folk that had been sold on the dream of a rebuilt and revitalized city. Nine days ago, the mayor had barred everyone from Ascension from even approaching the walls, though exceptions had been made for Tahir and Mereck, as well as food deliveries. Six days ago, they'd stopped accepting even those. Val had gone in since—invisibly, of course—and from what he'd overheard, the nobility had started railing for an independent Vestvall, professing outrage over the loss of so many of their people to Ascension.

Rain couldn't even blame them, really.

"I still think we're being too polite," Ameliah said. She glanced up at one of the sentries, who immediately ducked down behind the makeshift battlements to hide from her gaze. "Banning us from the city. Making us wait. Rude."

Rain smiled. Her arm was still looped through his, and he gave it a friendly squeeze. "Patience is a virtue," he said, mock scolding her. "We're technically trespassing according to the terms Vanna agreed to, and I need the mayor in a good mood so we can have an honest conversation. With the success of light bulbs and the latest food numbers, the evacuation might not be necessary. Once he hears that, this tension might just—."

"Shh, someone's coming."

Rain subsided, and moments later, a new figure appeared atop the barricade. Ameliah reacted immediately, tightening her grip on Rain's arm and taking a step closer to him, behind, not in front. This was so shocking that Rain didn't hesitate, snapping up Force Ward and preparing himself for imminent assault. His alarm rose even higher as he took in the newcomer's appearance, but before he could take any further action, Ameliah surprised him again. She'd relaxed, releasing his arm and stepping away.

Rain blinked, confused. *What—?*

There was a thump of boots as the defender dropped from the top of the barricade, falling the three meters without any apparent regard for the distance. The man straightened, and Rain got a better look at him, taking in the wild shock of porcupine quills that he had in place of hair. His hands were darkly furred, with wickedly sharp-looking claws. His face, too, was like that of a porcupine, with beady black eyes and a pointed snout. His appearance was at odds with his attire, consisting of a rich green doublet brocaded with gold and pants to match. Fancy pants.

When the man spoke, his voice was normal enough, despite a mouth filled with oversized beaver teeth.

"So, they finally sent someone important to see us."

"It's okay," Ameliah said to Rain, sounding almost sheepish. "You can relax. He's just one of the Shifters. I thought...never mind. Vanna didn't specify, so I just assumed they'd both have full transformations."

"Gods, there's a woman under there," the porcupine man said. He brushed a hand through his quills, slicking them back, then stepped forward and extended it to her. He even managed a greasy smile somehow, despite his enormous bucked teeth. "Lord Egan Urs. A pleasure."

Rain narrowed his eyes.

When Ameliah didn't take his offered hand, Egan frowned, then his skin rippled, the hair receding to reveal pale flesh beneath. The quills sunk back into his skull, leaving only normal hair, black and wavy. His face likewise transformed, and Rain realized that he was young—very young, perhaps seventeen.

"Come now, don't be rude," Egan continued. "Didn't your mother teach you not to judge people by their appearance?"

"You wouldn't happen to be related to an *Argan* Urs, would you?" Rain asked coldly, already knowing the answer.

"You know my father?" Egan asked, raising an eyebrow and apparently missing the subtext. The smile returned, just as greasy as it had been before, and the offered hand shifted its target. "That must make you the captain. It shouldn't surprise me to learn that you've heard of the noble lineage of Urs. Lord...Rain, is it? Tell me, is that your given name, or that of your house? Your people weren't very enlightening in that regard."

"That's because I'm not a lord," Rain said. Like Ameliah, he made no move to take the offered appendage. Despite his previous resolution to be polite, he was suddenly finding that he was having trouble in that regard. Apart from who this man was—or rather, who his father was—something about the noble was rubbing Rain entirely the wrong way.

"Ah," Egan said, retracting his hand. "Well, that explains your manners." He snorted, shaking his head, his bearing changing almost instantly. "Commoners. No manners at all. I suppose we're back to this then."

Rain tensed as the noble's skin rippled, quills reappearing as his hands morphed back into claws. Egan spread his arms wide, taking a stance like a sumo wrestler. "Remove yourselves, or I shall remove you for...yourselves. Damn." He shook his head, recovering quickly. "As a better man, I felt compelled to try diplomacy, but the mayor does not wish to speak to you. Your lackey, the Vanna woman, made it quite clear that you intend to steal what rightfully belongs to Vestvall. You can't have it. Now leave before I kill you and yours as I should have the moment you arrived. You are all beneath me, and you should be thankful that my father is such a staunch supporter of the mayor's authority."

"Nobody is that stupid," Rain said flatly. He glanced at Ameliah, finding that his simmering anger had evaporated. "This is bait."

"I agree," Ameliah said, standing completely at ease with her arms crossed.

Rain snorted, then looked back at the Vestvallan noble, who had recoiled in shock. He left Force Ward running just in case the intelligence he'd received was wrong, but when he continued, he made no effort to moderate his tone. "You know who we are, and you know our reputations. From that, you know we won't kill you just for running your mouth. What is your game here? Are you hoping we'll attack you so the mayor can paint us as the enemy? Did he send you specifically because he knows I'm friends with Jamus?"

"You... You dare?!" Egan demanded, to his credit maintaining the act quite convincingly, supposing that is what it was. "Have no doubt, I am more than enough to deal with the both of you. And to be so crass as to mention that common dalliance of my lady stepmother?" He scoffed. "Have you no sense of decorum?"

Ameliah snorted, then caught Rain's eye. "They must have sent him to stall us." She uncrossed her arms, then gestured to the wall. "Come on. Just ignore him."

Rain nodded, his patience spent. He walked past the spluttering teen, then eyed the barrier before him. Judging Velocity to be unnecessary, he simply shifted his stats to Strength. With a running start, he made it to the top in a single leap, landing in a crouch. Ameliah made it look even easier, alighting gracefully beside him and sending the nearby sentries scrambling back.

Behind them, Egan screamed in wordless outrage, but Rain paid the noise no mind. He rose smoothly, taking his first good look at the surviving section of Vestvall. The noble quarter was remarkably untouched. The wide, cobbled street beyond the barricade was flanked by closely-spaced buildings, firelight flickering in their windows. Thanks to Detection, he'd already known that they were occupied, and he could feel the weight of dozens of eyes pressing down on him, though most of the attention was coming from what was clearly the welcoming party.

Standing on the street was a formation of perhaps three dozen people. The mayor stood at the back, flanked by two distinct groups. Lord Argan Urs was easy to pick out from his description. He was an older, stern-looking man wearing the same green as his foolish son, though with less gold embroidery. Beside him stood a woman with steel-gray hair, doubtless Jamus's ex. It occurred to Rain, then, that he didn't actually know her name. To their left were a number of women armed with spears—house guards, judging by the uniform. On the mayor's other side was Lord Hakim. He was a Fire Mage and was wearing a robe and hat much like

Jamus's, though in blue. He was accompanied by his two sons, also Fire Mages, as well as several guards bearing swords and wearing the blue and silver of his house. There were a few more nobles in the rear, but none matched the description Rain had received of Lady Sale, the only remaining awakened who wasn't accounted for. In front of the mayor and the nobles was a double-rank of townsfolk, unarmored, but armed with crossbows.

Every single one of them was leveled in their direction.

Rain tilted his head. *Where did they get all those?*

Silence fell, other than the scrabbling of Egan's claws as he attempted to clamber up the wall.

Stepping forward, the mayor spoke, his voice firm. "You are not welcome here."

Rain shook his head slowly, his eyes moving past the mayor, down the road to where it opened up into a cobbled square. In the center was a pile of corpses. Monster corpses, mercifully, torn and rotting. But still.

He inhaled slowly, the odor of rot and corruption coming to his nose, then turned to Ameliah, shaking his head slowly. "Val was right. I didn't want to believe it."

"Look," Ameliah said, pointing and causing a bit of a reaction in the crowd as dozens of crossbows shifted to target her.

Rain looked. Beside the pile of corpses was a splotch of something on the cobblestones. It was difficult to identify from this distance, even with his perception accolade, but after a moment,

he recognized it. Slime. Clear slime. And in its center, lying there on the cobblestones, what might have been an arrow.

"They killed them," Ameliah said, lowering her arm. "Lured them in with that pile, then killed them."

"Monsters are to be destroyed on sight," a voice called out, bringing Rain's attention back to the crowd. It had been Lord Urs who had spoken. The man was staring at him, his glare oddly intense, though his voice was flat and passionless, his tone matter of fact. "They consume filth and spread disease, even as their presence summons more of their kind. We are no fools to accept your so-called gifts."

"The absolute softskulls," Ameliah muttered, anger clear in her voice. "That's not even close to right."

Rain felt that anger too, but he did his best to push it away. Normal Crystal Slimes weren't like Dozer. They were barely even aware, operating on the most basic of instincts.

But still.

The sheer, callous stupidity was mind-boggling. Rain had heard it said that monsters could respawn based on proximity—self-replenishing packs of Kin and so forth—but in the case of Crystal Slimes, that would only have been a good thing. In fact, he'd been hoping for it, but as of yet, no examples had been observed. As far as he knew, it was just a rumor.

"Leave!" the mayor's voice shouted from the crowd, and Rain returned his attention to him. Oddly, the man looked nervous. As Rain watched, the mayor looked over his shoulder at the

gathered nobles, then returned his gaze to Rain before beginning to thread his way through the ranks of townsfolk. Reaching the front, he planted his feet, then crossed his arms. "I said leave! Now! Before you make us do something regrettable!"

Rain narrowed his eyes, beginning to understand. The mayor was not awakened. When he'd met him before, Rain had actually been impressed by the man's grit in withstanding the pressure of his broken soul. Even after it had become clear that he was a scheming snake of a politician, Rain had still held some respect for him. The mayor didn't want this, and he knew that the only possible result of this confrontation, should it come to a fight, was the total defeat of Vestvall. His power to prevent the clash, though, was limited. He served at the mercy of the other players, all much more powerful than him in the most literal sense. It was more than likely that he had been elected as some sort of compromise, the three awakened families not wanting any of the others to hold the office.

Spreading his arms in a gesture of peace, Rain spoke, addressing the mayor and the mayor alone. "Mayor Graymond, we should speak. In private. If you would prefer to join us at our camp, we can leave and—"

Suddenly, the wall below Rain lurched, and he cried out in alarm, cutting off his speech. Beside him, Ameliah reacted even more strongly, dashing along the battlements toward one of the bow-wielding sentries. Terrified shrieks rose from the gathered crowd, and a noise trembled through the air, like the passing of a large truck. The shaking continued, and there was a sharp clatter of nails on metal as something slammed into the back of Rain's neck. He whirled, seeing Egan standing there, clutching at his hand. By the sound, the damage hadn't been sufficient to trigger Force Ward. The spell wouldn't waste Rain's mana, not when his armor's base hardness was enough.

Behind him, a nameless voice cried out. "They're attacking! Loose! Loose! Loose!"

"No!" the mayor shouted, mirroring Rain's own cry as he watched Ameliah. She'd snatched the bow away from the sentry, as well as a fistful of arrows, and was already drawing back the string. Fire splashed against her breastplate, first one bolt, then two more, followed shortly by a hail of crossbow bolts.

"Ameliah!" Rain yelled, his awakened lungs allowing him to cut through the noise as bolts pinged from his own armor. "Don't!"

Ameliah glanced his way, and Rain immediately realized that he was an idiot. She'd moved to shield the sentry whose bow she'd stolen and wasn't aiming the weapon at the crowd, but was instead looking around, searching for the real threat.

The ground continuing to shake beneath him, Rain altered the settings of Force Ward, covering everyone in range, not just the two of them. Egan clawed at Rain again, yelping in surprise as Force Ward triggered, stopping the blow cold with a distortion in the air. Rain felt a minuscule draw on his mana as the spell protected the idiot from himself, but he had other things on his mind.

Whirling, he looked out over the ruins of the town outside the barricade. Dropping Force Ward for a moment, he risked a quick pulse of Detection, but the lack of a response wasn't enough for him to relax.

This can't be the townsfolk's doing. They don't have a Geomancer. If it's not a monster, then what—? Shit, the buildings.

Rain turned again, and while the ground was still trembling, nothing had yet collapsed as far as he could see. Below, the mayor was screaming at the crossbow wielders, most of which were standing down with terrified expressions, though a few were struggling to reload. Lord Hakim and his sons were continuing to hurl fire at Ameliah, surrounded by their guards, and in place of Lord Urs stood a pair of enormous, shaggy bears, their brown fur streaked with white. Sallow Bears, Rain corrected himself, already knowing that to be Lord Urs's Arcane Shifter transformation. The startling thing was that there were two of them, and that Jamus's ex-wife had vanished.

She's awakened? That wasn't in the brief...

As Rain was considering this revelation, the shaking stopped as abruptly as it had come. He staggered, adjusting his footing on the now stable ground as the crowd cried out in surprise, turning rapidly to relief.

"Did you sense anything?" Ameliah asked calmly, startling Rain again. He turned to see her approaching at a rapid walk. Fire was continuing to splash harmlessly against her armor.

"No," Rain said, sighing as he caught Egan's hand. Like the Fire Mages, the young noble seemed amazingly unable to get the hint. Roughly, Rain jerked him around, placing himself between the idiot noble and the other idiot nobles so nobody got burned. "No monsters around other than the Shifters."

Ameliah tilted her head. "An earthquake?" Another Firebolt struck her in the side of the helmet, and she sighed. "Can you do something about that, please?"

Rain nodded as Egan struggled to free himself from his grip. The kid was pretty strong, actually, but Rain was stronger, thanks to his ring. Looking over his shoulder, he saw that the two other Shifters hadn't moved. Unlike Lord Hakim and his sons, most people seemed more concerned with themselves than continuing their foolish attack.

Rain spared one more look for the buildings, then switched to Suppression, satisfied that the physical danger was past. There was a strangled cry from one of the younger Hakims, who'd been in the middle of casting another Firebolt. As Rain watched, the other two reacted similarly, stumbling and raising their hands to their heads.

"Enough!" Rain roared, his voice overriding the startled shouts as people realized what had happened.

"What did—?" Lord Hakim gasped, flames flickering at his fingertips, then dying away. "How!?"

"Idiots!" The mayor yelled, stomping over to the Hakims. "I told you to let me handle this! Why did you attack!?"

"They attacked first!" one of the sons shouted angrily, still pressing a hand to his head. "You felt it! The bitch is a Geomancer!" Rain bristled. "She was trying to tear down the wall!"

"She *built* the wall, you pigeon-headed hill-ninny!" The mayor shouted back, snatching the man's hat from his head and throwing it to the ground. "If they wanted us dead, we'd be dead, and you'd have been the one that killed us!"

Fighting against the adrenaline pounding in his veins, Rain took a deep, shaky breath, then turned, releasing Egan, who'd finally stopped struggling. The moment he was free, the

porcupine man scrambled away, then seemed to catch himself and straightened. He turned, then smiled at them, smoothing back his quills before spreading his arms in a shrug.

Rain sighed, then dropped Suppression and turned to stare down at the top of the mayor's head. "Mayor Graymond."

Freezing for a moment, the mayor turned, then looked up.

Rain paused, thinking hard. Coming to a decision, he nodded, then spoke in a firm voice, one that would carry. "We did not cause that. I know you might not believe me, but I give you my word." He glanced at Ameliah, then back at the mayor. "See to your people. We are leaving, and we will send our healers to you as soon as we return to our camp. You WILL allow them inside your walls. This stupidity...this division...it ends now. I'm not telling you that you need to join Ascension or give up your homes or anything like that. We are all on the same side here. That earthquake, whatever caused it, is just one more thing that we have to deal with together."

"You're doing great," Ameliah whispered to Rain, stepping closer to him and dropping her stolen bow and quiver to clatter to the battlements. "We should hurry back, though. I'm worried the crack might have collapsed."

Rain nodded, already having had that thought. "One more thing!" he shouted, pointing past the mayor at the pile of corpses in the distant square. He shifted his gaze toward Lord Urs, who had changed back to human form. "I can't stress enough how stupid it was to kill the Crystal Slimes we gave you. If that's the kind of thinking your *nobles* are doing, then maybe you should think about how much allegiance you really owe them." Rain let his arm fall. "By

that act, they chose for you to live in *filth*, either through stupidity or as some kind of obtuse political ploy. In either case, it's unforgivable."

Rain turned back to the mayor, who'd gone pale and was looking nervously between Rain and Lord Urs. Immediately seeing the problem, Rain raised his voice again. "Mayor Graymond, I expect you to keep things under control here until I return. Help people. Check the buildings. Anyone who does anything stupid or tries to interfere with you will answer to me."

The mayor seemed to sag in relief before catching himself and giving Rain a dignified nod.

Rain crossed his arms, staring straight at Lord Urs, who was watching him with a contemplative expression. A flash of fire made Rain look away, seeing Lord Hakim trying his magic and finding that it had returned. He and his sons were staring at Rain and Ameliah, hate and determination in their eyes, though in response to Rain's scrutiny, the older lord snuffed out his Firebolt and looked away.

They still don't really get it, do they? They think they actually had a chance. Rain shook his head in disbelief. *Seriously, how dense can they be? Maybe they don't believe Ameliah's actually a silverplate? Hells, do they even know what a silverplate is?*

Breathing deeply and smelling the stench of the city, Rain looked at the pile of corpses and had to fight against another flash of anger. Judging the distance, he decided that it would serve as a perfect demonstration.

This might cause a bit more panic, but...

Uncrossing his arms, he reached for Purify as he addressed the crowd. "Watch your eyes, everyone. This will be...a little bright."

Ameliah laughed, pressing her hand against his shoulder. "Oh, yes, do it. This is going to be priceless."