

## 138: Metal

Tallheart rumbled, accepting the small wooden box the man behind the desk was offering him. Inside would be the Force Crysts he'd purchased back from the company. He turned away wordlessly, heading for the exit.

"Thanks, Smelt," said Ellis from somewhere behind him. "That should be all we need for now."

"Right." Smelt cleared his throat, raising his voice slightly. "You're welcome, I guess."

Ellis laughed. "Don't mind him. That was his thank-you rumble."

"How can you tell?" Smelt asked.

Tallheart didn't wait to hear Ellis's response. He turned his head, ducking as he guided his antlers through the low doorway. He veered left, walking around the large group of humans practicing Swordplay under Samson's direction. Over the past few days, Ameliah had knocked down the walls separating the company hall from the tavern and the old workshop, combining all three into one massive room. The stage where Rain had given his speech was gone. It was in the new tavern, he believed—on the other side of the kitchen and food storage rooms. He hadn't bothered to investigate. The tavern was for the city humans. It held nothing of interest to him.

Tallheart frowned as he approached the northern wall. His smelter was set up here, larger now, and sunken partially into the ground. A large firebox was built into its side, threaded through with pipes of Thermalitic Bronze for better heat transfer. Nearby, charcoal had been piled beneath a table bearing various molds and tools for shaping molten rock. The smelter's drain

was set low to the ground opposite the firebox, near several neat rows of bricks that had been left there to cool. There was also a large pile of crushed ore nearby, ready to be added to the intake.

Everything was in order except for the group of four humans lounging nearby. They were supposed to be working. Instead, they were playing dice, seated on the ground and surrounded by their cast-off protective equipment. None of them noticed his approach until he was right on top of them.

"Hmm," he rumbled, low and deep, making his discontent known.

"Ahhhh, shit," Kalman said resignedly, looking up. There was a smudge of charcoal on his cheek. "Fun's over."

"Fun for you three," said Corrin, the Geomancer. "The dice are against me today, yeah? I'm going to be on kitchen duty for the next month. Hello, Tallheart. Sorry, we were just taking a little break."

"Tallheart," said Taron, nodding respectfully before looking back at the others. "I'm not letting you out of it, Cor. The dice have spoken. You are officially the soup maid."

Ellis appeared at Tallheart's elbow, the former farrier having followed him from the storeroom. He smiled up at Tallheart, gesturing toward the dice game. "And that is why we're not allowed to gamble with credits. Soup maid. Ha."

Tallheart rumbled in vague agreement. He walked over to the smelter, then pressed a hand against it, sending his senses through the metal. He could barely feel the liquid, meaning that it was mostly nonmetallic. The response from what little metal there was told him that the

tank was almost full. The humans were not taking a break because they had finished. They were neglecting their duty.

He shook his head slowly, then looked back at the seated workers. "Drain the excess, then continue adding ore."

"Um, sure," Corrin said. The Geomancer got up, then dusted himself off and walked over to the drain valve. "It's just... Can you extend this spout a little further, please? I almost burned myself earlier. If it were longer, my hand wouldn't have to be so close to the molten rock, yeah?" He paused awkwardly. "Don't bother if it's too much trouble."

"Hmm," Tallheart said, frowning as he placed a hand on the spout. It was troublesome, catering to everyone's needs. He much preferred working alone. Focusing on the enchantment woven into the metal, he supported it with his will as he used his other skills to make the requested modification. Fortunately, Heat Copper was a simple alloy. It was easy to sculpt, even without tools.

"There," he said, taking his hand away. "Do not let the stone cool in the spout. It will clog."

"Right," Corrin said. "Thank you."

"Mmm." *How much longer will it be before he can use Stonemolding? Rain is going too easy on them.*

"Uh... Excuse me? Tallheart?" the last of the humans said, her voice hesitant.

Tallheart turned to look at her silently. To his mild surprise, she didn't shy away. Many of the humans had started doing that ever since he'd dealt with Hegar and Anton. Instead, she extended a hand.

"I'm trying to meet everyone," she said. "I just wanted to introduce myself. I'm Lana."

"I know who you are," Tallheart said, considering her hand.

"Oh, sorry Lana," Ellis said, stepping forward. "I should have told you. You're supposed to bow. Cervidians don't really—"

Tallheart rumbled, taking the woman's hand with extreme care. *Humans*. He shook it gently, then released her.

"She's a provisional member now," Taron said, though no one had asked. "I know because I ran her combat test. She's actually pretty good with a staff for someone with no training."

Tallheart turned away, heading for the metal-banded wooden door in the northern wall. It led to a set of curved stone stairs that descended to the workshop.

"Compared to you, everyone is good with a staff," Kalman said behind him.

"Hey!" Taron protested. "I let her trip me! Rain said to go easy."

"Wait, he did?" Lana asked. "I don't want any special treatment..."

"Don't worry about that, Lana," Corrin said. "He said to go easy on everyone. As long as you're in decent shape, we can teach you the rest, yeah?"

"Oh," Lana said, sounding relieved. "Okay then." There was a pause, then she raised her voice. "It was nice meeting you, Tallheart!"

"Mmm," Tallheart rumbled, not looking back.

"Is he always like that?" Lana whispered, likely thinking her voice too low for him to hear.

"Pretty much," Corrin whispered back. "He doesn't like strangers."

"That's putting it mildly," Kalman replied at a normal volume.

Tallheart shook his head slowly, opening the door. *Foolish.*

"Hang on, Tallheart," Ellis said. The crate he was carrying clinked in his haste. "I need to bring these down there."

Tallheart grunted, leaving the door ajar and beginning his descent into the earth. The walls transitioned from dirt to stone as the stairs curved in a tight arc. Ameliah hadn't dug down that far, just enough to shield the company's crafters from casual divination. Even a few hands of earth were sufficient to block Scrying Pool. It wouldn't stop something like Piercing Gaze or Eavesdrop, but local Diviners weren't the concern. Rain suspected that the Watch was observing them from Fel Sadanis.

*Paranoia. Good.*

Tallheart shook his head. More elaborate precautions would have to wait. The only counter-divination runes he knew were those to prevent targeted tracking. He had an extensive

network of them built into his armor for obvious reasons, but he'd never felt the need to learn how to ward an area. It was easier to just move on whenever he was discovered.

He frowned. *Things have changed. Perhaps it is time to learn.*

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*It would require Arcane Crysts. I already have a use for the two that are left. Troublesome.*

A wave of hot air washed over him as he entered the workshop, almost directly below where the humans had been playing their game. He took a moment to look around. Staavo was over by the anvil, and Myth and Reason were having a conversation in Vejik at a workbench covered with alchemical equipment. Romer was also there, hunched over a much cleaner station and working on something Tallheart couldn't see, likely one of his runestones.

Tallheart tilted his head, considering. His antlers easily clearing the high ceiling, which had been designed with them in mind. *A Crystless anti-divination ward is impossible in every metal that I know. Perhaps it could work in stone, however. I am not sure. I could ask him...*

Tallheart sighed softly. *No. He could not inscribe it, even if he could uncover the sequence. He is too inexperienced.*

Knowing Ellis wasn't far behind him, Tallheart moved out of the doorway, walking toward the rapidly spinning generator on the far side of the room. It was tied into a flywheel, which, in turn, was coupled to the steam engine. All of this together took up the entirety of the back wall. Despite the constant motion, a quiet rattle was all that could be heard. The noise of the machinery was being suppressed by the Muffler—in retrospect, a waste of precious Arcane Crysts.

The engine itself was quieter now, regardless. They'd made various improvements, one of which was a method for recycling the steam. The return pipe was made of bronze, and it snaked back and forth like the entrails of a dead animal. That had been another of Rain's ideas, given in a rare moment when he hadn't been hidden away in his room meditating. He called it a condenser, and it was working well enough that they no longer needed to refill the water tank every few hours.

Approaching the boiler, Tallheart peered at the pressure gauge, then frowned. The steam engine got its heat from the molten contents of the smelter, the bottom half of which descended through the ceiling nearby. The two tanks were connected by a heat exchanger made of Thermalitic Bronze. It wasn't anything fancy, just a solid bar that passed through the wall of the smelter and into the side of the boiler. He had enchanted it to allow the rate of heat conduction to be adjusted—and to not melt, of course.

Nudging aside the fabric-like insulation, Tallheart touched the bar with a finger. He used Mana Manipulation to access the control runes and increase the bar's thermal resistance. While he was at it, he also refilled its capacitance rune and the capacitance rune of the smelter itself.

There was a clatter of glass from behind him as Ellis set down his burden. "Here you go, guys. These are all the bottles Smelt had. He'll ask Mlem to pick up more from the city."

"Thank you," Myth said. "This should do for now."

"You're welcome," Ellis said, then sneezed.

Tallheart frowned, then walked to the flywheel and pulled a nearby lever. The remnants of the Forgewagon's drivetrain engaged and a blast of cold air rushed into the room through a vent in the ceiling, drawn in by a steel fan.

"Hey!" Staavo yelled, spinning around to glare at him. "I was finally getting warm!"

Tallheart shook his head, then jerked his chin in Ellis's direction. "Unawakened."

"So?" Staavo asked.

"Fumes," Tallheart said, gesturing to the valves protruding from the bottom of the smelter's tank.

"Bah," Staavo said, waving a hand. "That's what healers are for." He grumbled to himself, turning back to the anvil.

"Thanks for worrying about me, Tallheart," Ellis said, moving over to join him near the flywheel.

"Now that you have the Crysts, are you going to make the Force Steel? Can I watch?"

Tallheart considered silently, then sighed. "You may watch, but you must remain silent."

"Thanks," Ellis said, beaming.

"Mmm," Tallheart rumbled, moving toward the anvil. Staavo was still there. In the way. "Move."

"Rude," Staavo said, not even turning around. "I'm working here."

"Work elsewhere," Tallheart said.

Staavo sighed, setting down the pliers he was holding. He turned, planting his fists on his hips. "I would if you made me my own anvil and tools! How many times do I need to ask? I am starting to think all that hammering has made you deaf."

Tallheart clenched his teeth. *That is enough. I will not tolerate this. Not today.*

He shook his head as he spoke, raising his pitch to imitate a human voice. "Make me a shovel, Tallheart, for I do not wish to walk to the city to buy one. My toes are cold, Tallheart, make me a heater plate for my room. Make me an anvil, Tallheart, so I can pretend that I know how to use it." He let his voice return to normal. "That is how you sound. You are not a smith. You do not need an anvil. Move."

"Listen here, you—" Staavo began.

"Staavo, please, don't argue with him," Ellis cut in. "He's a little stressed right now."

"I am not stressed," Tallheart said.

"You are," Ellis said.

Tallheart's frown deepened. "Out," he said, his voice becoming harder than steel. "Everyone."

Ellis winced. "Sorry, I just—"

"Now," Tallheart said, hearing chairs scraping behind him.

"I'm not moving," Staavo said stubbornly, crossing his arms.

Tallheart narrowed his eyes.

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Rain sighed, rubbing at his neck. "I'll talk to him, but honestly, I think I'm on Tallheart's side. I had no idea people were bothering him that much."

Vanna nodded. "All the same, he went too far."

"Yeah," Rain said, shaking his head tiredly.

"You don't look so good, Rain," Vanna said. "Meditation isn't sleep."

"I know," Rain said, opening the door to the stairwell. "Trust me, I know."

Leaving Vanna behind, Rain descended the stairs, hearing Jamus's voice through the door at the bottom, which was ajar. He pushed it open the rest of the way, spotting the orange-robed mage sitting on a stool near Tallheart, who was standing hunched over a workbench with his back to him.

"You can't throw an old man like that, Tallheart, no matter how much he deserves it," Jamus said, looking up mid-sentence as Rain shut the door.

"I did not throw him," Tallheart said over the rhythmic scratching of a Telscribe.

"He says you did," said Jamus. 'Help,' he mouthed, motioning Rain over.

"Tallheart," Rain said, clearing his throat. "What happened?"

There was a click as Tallheart set down the Telscribe, then he turned to look at Rain, his face unreadable. "You already know."

Rain sighed. "Yes, I do. Ellis told me."

"Mmm," Tallheart said, shaking his head.

Jamus glanced awkwardly at Tallheart, then looked back at Rain. "How is Staavo?"

Rain shook his head. "He's pretty pissed, but he isn't hurt. His prosthetic fell off when he went down, but it didn't break or anything." The door behind him opened, and Rain jumped, turning to see Ameliah. He nodded to her, then turned back around.

"That is a relief," Jamus said. He shook his head, then glared at Tallheart. "That doesn't make it okay. Staavo is my friend, too, you know."

Tallheart rumbled, a note of annoyance entering his voice as he spoke. "As I have said, Jamus, I did not throw him."

Ameliah placed her hand in the middle of Rain's back, moving up to stand next to him. "It wasn't that bad. Ellis said it was more...a toss. Like a sack of potatoes."

Tallheart frowned, looking away.

Rain sighed, pinching his forehead. "Jamus is right, Tallheart. You can't do that to a person, even if they deserve it."

Tallheart rumbled unhappily, turning around and picking up his Telscribe once more. "I will apologize tomorrow." The scratching sound resumed. "I wish to be alone."

Ameliah's hand left Rain's back as she walked forward. "Tell us what's bothering you, Tallheart. What's *really* bothering you."

Tallheart didn't respond, and Jamus stood, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Staavo irritates me too, sometimes, but this seems like more than that. What's going on?"

The scratching stopped, and Tallheart sighed.

Rain moved forward, speaking in the awkward silence. "I told Vanna to have people give you more space. There won't be any more silly requests." He paused. "I'm sorry again about the fork."

Tallheart set down his tool and turned around. "That is not the problem." He shook his head, frowning as he corrected himself. "Not the only problem." He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "Today was her birthday."

"Oh," Rain said, feeling as if he'd been clipped by a passing car. He shared a look with Ameliah and Jamus, who'd had similar reactions.

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "It is not an excuse. I should not have lost my temper."

"It's okay," Rain said, stepping closer. "Birthdays are...hard."

"Yes," Ameliah said, wrapping her arm around Tallheart's shoulders. "We'll make sure nobody bothers you for the rest of the day."

Tallheart shook his head, gently pushing her arm away. "Foolish. There is work to be done."

"It's okay to take a day off," Rain said.

Tallheart snorted. "Take your own advice."

Jamus chuckled. "He has a point, Rain. You look like someone punched you in both eyes. Have you been sleeping enough?"

"Everyone keeps asking me that," Rain said. "You know the answer."

Ameliah sighed as Tallheart turned back to his workbench, then looked at Rain. "Have you made any progress at all?"

Rain shook his head. "The Bastion still falls apart when I try to leave. I can feel Dozer in the chaos now, but I don't have anywhere safe to put him, even if I could find a way to—sorry. Tallheart probably doesn't want to hear this right now."

"It is fine," Tallheart said. "Today is just a day like any other. She would have laughed at me if she saw me like this. She always said I was too sentimental."

"Maybe tell us a story about her?" Jamus said. "A happy one? I find that it helps to remember good times, even if it hurts."

Tallheart shook his head. "Not today."

The scratching of the Telscribe began again, and Rain peered over Tallheart's shoulder to see what he was working on. It was a breastplate—made of bronze.

*Huh.*

"Ask your question," Tallheart said, not looking up.

*Mindreader.* Rain smiled softly. "It's okay, Tallheart. I'll ask later. Come on, Ameliah, Jamus, let's give him some space."

"It is alright," Tallheart said. "I have changed my mind. I do not wish to think of the past. Your questions will keep me in the present."

"Uh oh," Ameliah said, forcing a smile. "Now you've done it, Tallheart. He's got question permission now." She turned to Jamus. "Run while you can. Save yourself."

"Pshaw," Jamus said. "I'll stay. I need to witness this."

"Witness what?" Ameliah asked.

"Rain breaking the record," Jamus answered. "Carten and I have started keeping track of the highest number of consecutive questions he's asked without pausing to breathe."

Ameliah's smile became genuine as she laughed. "What's his current best?"

"Five," Jamus said. "His lung capacity is improving."

Tallheart rumbled with amusement.

"I hate you all," Rain said, smiling to show he wasn't serious. *Nice work lightening the mood, you two.*

"Go on, Rain," Ameliah said, moving behind him to massage his shoulders. "You can get to six. I believe in you."

Rain snorted. "I refuse to play this game." He sighed as Ameliah removed her hands. *That actually felt really nice.* "Just one question to start, Tallheart. You're sure you don't mind?"

"Yes," Tallheart said. "Next question."

Rain smiled. "Why bronze?"

"Thermalitic Bronze," Tallheart said. "It is an alloy of about nine parts Heat Copper and one part Cold Tin. It is the best surface metal for most enchantments dealing with either Heat or Cold. I am using it as the central core, which I will then cover with Chemical Pewter before adding a final layer of Force Steel. I would like to go further, but I lack the materials. Arcane Crysts would help significantly, but I would need...hmm...at least ten."

"Here it comes," Jamus said, pulling away from Rain and raising his hands as if to ward off an explosion. He looked at Ameliah. "You see how he's begun vibrating?"

Rain swatted at him. "Anyway, Tallheart, I get that different materials have different elemental alignments based on their intrinsic runes, but—"

"Hold on," Ameliah said, cutting in. "What's an intrinsic rune? I've heard the term here and there, but I've never gotten a coherent explanation for what it means."

"Every material has a rune," Tallheart said. "For metals, that includes alloys. I am the wrong person to ask about other things, though I have some knowledge." He picked up the unfinished breastplate, then set it aside, replacing it with a sheet of paper that he stole from a

neighboring workbench. "This is the rune for copper," he said, sketching quickly with a stub of charcoal. "And this is the rune for elemental Heat. There is a rune for each of the eight elements."

"Yes," Jamus said, nodding. "I knew that."

"Heat Copper is made by combining the correct ratio of powdered Crysts and molten metal." Tallheart continued. "Anyone may do this, but without the proper alchemical skills, the result will be poor." He drew another rune, then pointed at it. "When the materials are combined, the rune changes. Note the similarities. If done poorly, it will be distorted, like this." He drew another rune.

"Okay..." Ameliah said. "And the intrinsic rune is important because...?"

"It must match the runes used in the enchantment," Tallheart said, continuing to draw. Rain blinked, then smiled. Some of the shapes were already starting to wiggle ever so slightly. He was looking forward to Ameliah's reaction when she noticed, assuming she didn't know what was coming.

"This is the sequence for Heat resistance," Tallheart said. "It is made from the Heat rune, as well as several others. If I want to add Heat resistance to Heat Copper, the alignment with the intrinsic rune will result in a stronger enchantment. It is not so in iron." He pointed at the page. "This one. See how the shape is different?"

"Not really," Jamus said, squinting.

"Hmph," Tallheart said, adding yet more runes to the page. "This is the rune for Cold Tin. If I tried to add Heat resistance to Cold Tin, the enchantment would not hold. The runes are in

opposition. Thermalitic Bronze, however, preserves the properties of both Heat and Cold.” Tallheart began another rune, this one breathtakingly complex. The harder Rain looked at it, the more it seemed to change.

“Tallheart, how are you doing that?” Ameliah asked, staring.

Rain smiled. *Ha.*

“I am not doing anything,” Tallheart said. “Runes become more difficult to read as they become more complex. It appears to move because you do not understand its meaning. It has also been written on paper, which means it will degrade. It will not last much longer.”

“Crazy, right?” Rain said. “I still haven’t gotten over it.” He pointed at the notebook. “It shouldn’t be possible, but there it is. It’s like an optical illusion, but way worse.”

“Mmm,” Tallheart said.

“My head hurts already,” Jamus said. “Rain, have you written a *Common Knowledge* article on runes?”

“No,” Rain said. “I started to, but a pamphlet won’t do it. I think I’d need a whole book to do this justice.”

“Many books,” Tallheart said.

“I’m starting to regret asking, honestly,” Ameliah said. “Is it too late to run?”

"Things are, hmm, different if you do not add the Cryst to the alloy, but instead use it as a focus," Tallheart said, ignoring her as he set down the piece of charcoal. "Sometimes, it is necessary. It requires fewer starting materials and is less dependent on the metal, but the enchantment will be unstable. The Cryst will eventually fail, at which point it will need to be replaced. Hmm. What else? Some enchantments do not require Crysts at all. Hardness. Durability. Weight. Permeability. Hmm. Even basic capacitance runes. These can be done with Tel alone in most metals, though not all. The higher-tier runes require—"

"Stop, please," Ameliah said, raising a hand. "Me understand. Fire metal good for big fire magic. Kill many monster."

Tallheart snorted, and Rain smiled at Ameliah. "Tallheart likes talking about runes—once he gets going, anyway."

The smith's face returned to impassivity as he tilted his head. "Or perhaps I have learned that if I do not explain fully, certain people will never stop asking questions."

"It is a bit of both, I think," said Jamus mildly. "Incidentally, Ameliah, that was a wonderful impression of Rain from a few months ago."

"Thank you," Ameliah said, bowing.

Rain smiled. "Anyway, Tallheart. Thermalitic Bronze is good for Heat and Cold, and you are using two other metals for Chem and Force, making three layers. My question is, don't you have to use less of each metal to keep the armor thin enough? Won't that limit the enchantment?"

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "Yes and no. Do you know how equipment slots work?"

"Yeah," Rain said, nodding. "I asked Staavo about that one a while ago."

Tallheart frowned. "What did he tell you?"

Rain shrugged. "A person only has a limited number of slots for magical gear. You can obviously carry as many swords as you want, within reason, but you can only activate the bonus from two at a time—some bullshit about the interaction with the soul or whatever. Anyway, there are twenty slots, not including temporary charms and stuff. Two weapons, ten rings, one amulet, chest, legs, feet, hands, head, underwear, and overwear. That's it."

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "Good enough."

"I have a question," Jamus said, raising a hand. "Rain, wasn't your old armor all one item? You said it could regrow itself, right? Even something like a whole glove? How does that work? And speaking of gloves, I have always wondered, why are they treated as one item and not two? Are they not separate?"

"Two hands, one whole," Tallheart said before Rain could inform Jamus that he'd broken the record. "It is the way of the world. If only one is worn, the effect drops by half."

"But why, though?" Jamus asked.

"Ask a scholar," Tallheart said. "To answer your other question, yes, Rain's armor was one item. Making a joined set using all five main armor slots is straightforward. There are advantages and disadvantages to doing so. Adding additional slots is more difficult, but possible."

"I see," Jamus said. "Thank you."

"Mmm," Tallheart said, looking back at Rain. "For a given slot, there is a maximum power for each enchantment. The limit also depends upon the metal used."

"Okay...wait," Ameliah said. "Let me make sure I understand what you're saying." She pointed at the unfinished breastplate. "Let's use that as an example. If you were going to add Heat resistance, how much could you get out of it?"

Tallheart raised an eyebrow. "Do you mean a stable enchantment, or do you mean something like the failed core breaker?"

"The stable kind," Ameliah said.

"Two hundred," Tallheart replied easily.

"Okay," Ameliah said, hovering her hand over the metal. "And if you made it twice as thick?"

"Two hundred," Tallheart repeated.

"Wait, what?" Rain asked.

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "Adding more metal increases durability and total enchantment capacity. It does not increase the maximum quality of a specific enchantment. To get more Heat resistance, I would need to use a different metal, such as Grand Thermalitic Bronze."

"Uh..." Rain shook his head. "So if you...thinned it down instead? Could you get two hundred Heat resistance from, like, a brass button on your jacket?"

"Do not confuse brass and bronze," Tallheart said. "They are different. And no, you could not." He touched the breastplate. "This much Thermalitic Bronze will allow the maximum level of both Heat and Cold resistance. It could be made smaller, but not as small as a button."

Jamus scratched at his ear. "So when you add more metal, you add more capacity? With the pewter and the steel, the armor would give...what? Two hundred resistance to Heat, Cold, Chem, and Force?"

"No," Tallheart said. "You have the correct idea, but it is not that simple. For Chemical Pewter, one hundred and fifty resistance is the maximum. For Force Steel, it is one hundred." He shook his head. "Force Iron would allow two hundred, but it has lower affinity with Hardness and Durability, apart from being weaker in general. It is not worth the effort of adding an additional layer to use both."

"Okay..." Ameliah said. "Why can't you just make two extra layers of bronze? I still don't understand why making it thicker wouldn't work."

Tallheart frowned. "It is as I said. The limit for a single enchantment is determined by the alignment between its rune sequence, the slot rune, and the intrinsic rune of the material. The amount of material only matters until that limit is reached. Adding different metals will not allow you to exceed the limit. The runes will interfere." He rumbled. "The skill of the smith also matters, but for this level of item, it is not an issue."

"Oh," Ameliah said, snapping her fingers. "It's like there's a cap. I think I've got it now. You can't go over two hundred Heat resistance because that's all Thermalitic Bronze can tolerate. Assuming you have enough metal, can you still add other stuff like mana capacitance?"

"Yes," Tallheart said.

Ameliah nodded, grinning in satisfaction. "And you're using more than one metal because it lets you get better alignment with the enchantments you want. It gets you more for less—more bonuses, less metal."

"Correct," Tallheart said. "Does everyone else understand?"

"Yes," Jamus said. "I need a drink after that, but I believe I have it."

Rain nodded. "I'll join you. I think I can smell my brain cooking. I might be thinking about this too hard."

"You think about everything too hard," Ameliah said, jostling him playfully. Rain smiled.

Tallheart rumbled, smiling as well. "For Rain's armor, I will add Heat Resistance, Cold Resistance, and Thermal Regulation to the Thermalitic Bronze core; Chemical Resistance and Mana Capacitance to the Chemical Pewter inner layer; and Force Resistance, Hardness, and Durability to the Force Steel outer jacket. There will be supporting and binding runes on all three layers to make the item act as one whole, using all five main armor slots."

"What about self-repair?" Rain asked, struggling to keep his composure.

Tallheart shook his head. "That would consume too much of the metal's capacity. Without it, the armor will require significantly more Tel to create and maintain." He shrugged. "We cannot be concerned with economics in the depths. I will make you a shield and a proper weapon as well." He turned to Ameliah. "Have you decided upon a build? What do you need?"

"I'm working on it," Ameliah said. "The camp is almost done, but there's still a lot for me to do in Vestvall as a Geomancer. The mayor wants fortifications, and so do I for my peace of mind. We can talk about me once you've finished with Rain. I've...gone through a lot of swords. Not that I doubt you, Tallheart, but will you be able to make something good enough to handle my stats with what you have in the camp?"

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "Perhaps. Perhaps not."

Ameliah nodded. "I'll pick a build that doesn't need much equipment, then. Once we're deeper and we have what you need, I can respecialize." She hesitated, then shook her head.

"Can I ask...sorry. Never mind."

"Ask," Tallheart said.

"I...shouldn't." Ameliah frowned, shaking her head.

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "You have a question about Snowlilly."

Ameliah winced. "Yes. Sorry."

"It is okay," Tallheart said. "Ask."

Ameliah sighed. "I just wanted to know what her class was. Was she an Equipment User? That's the thing I can think of that makes the most sense."

Tallheart nodded. "Yes, she was. At first. When she reached silver, she became a Wielder of Deep Vengeance."

Rain had to fight to control his reaction. *That class sounds...dark.*

Tallheart chuckled softly to himself.

Jamus shifted awkwardly. "What's funny?"

"I was just remembering," Tallheart said. "Lilly and I would discuss metalwork for days on end, just like we are doing now. We would huddle in cracks in the stone while I worked, and she would slaughter the monsters drawn by the sound of my hammer." He smiled. "Those conversations are some of my best memories. It was dangerous but also...simple. Us against the depths."

*I...don't know how to respond to that.*

"Thank you," Tallheart said, stretching his neck. "Speaking of my work has helped. Jamus was right. I should be remembering her on her birthday, not trying to forget." He chuckled. "Let us return to the surface. I have an apology to give."