

273: Backup

Feeling sympathy for the meat beneath a butcher's tenderizing mallet, Jamus found welcome distraction in awe.

Mining Outpost West Three was no mere outpost.

It was night, but magical white light bathed the hills below to reveal buildings covering an area fully the size of Fel Sadanis. Cranes and heavy equipment could be seen in wagon yards along the main thoroughfares, where even now, in the dead of night, laborers toiled to the song of rasping saws and carpenters' hammers. There was not just one minehead, but four that Jamus could see, their wood-braced openings yawning into hillsides where workers and ox carts trundled both in and out. The light came from gigantic glass globes atop metal stalks, filled with luminescent liquid and towering over the city like ethereal, artificial trees.

Toward the perimeter, concentric rows of squat houses ended abruptly where a broad, earthen wall encircled the entire area. It looked as if the miners had piled the tailings of their excavations into the means of their defense—such a volume of dirt that Jamus was sure powerful Geomancy had been at play unless the practice had started before it was known to be necessary. Except for the mountainous stone doors meeting the southern road, the defenses were crude, with only a rough-planked walkway to give footing to the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of uniformless guards patrolling atop them.

"What in Karum's sweaty armpit?" Staavo asked before a sudden jerk slammed his jaws together with a click.

Anya's Force platform—it was hard not to think of her as Lavarro, but Jamus was making an effort—was plummeting rapidly toward a circular plaza near the southern gate. Without a

word from Anya herself, one of the soldiers flying with them made a sharp gesture, and crimson light momentarily outshone the globes below. As Jamus blinked against the sudden spots filling his vision, a horn rang out from the ground, and he looked down to see the plaza's occupants scurrying to make way for their imminent landing.

"Brace!" Anya called, and Jamus's stomach lurched as the expected impact of the Force platform didn't come. Instead, their fall continued for an extra meter, leaving his poor, abused knees to absorb the impact.

The soldiers, awakened and clearly used to this, landed with more grace, one of them even going as far as to steady Staavo when the old man's spring artificial leg rebounded from the force. The Wind magic bubble surrounding them popped in a torrent of rushing air, assailing his nostrils with the scents of sawdust, pulverized rock, sweat, and smoke.

"Not my best landing," Anya said dryly, dusting her hands and turning to face her prisoners. Meanwhile, the soldiers were forming a perimeter while city folk gathered around them in a ring, pressing their heads to the dirt in supplication.

"It was...certainly a bit rough," Jamus managed.

For once, there was no offended cry from the soldiers. He'd merely voiced what sentiment they could not.

"Just hold on a moment," Anya said apologetically. "I don't know how adventurers spend their stat points, but this should help." She snapped her fingers, interrupting one of the nameless soldiers who was already in the midst of casting. "Hey, them first."

"Dominus," the soldier said, slamming a fist to her chest before thrusting a palm forward. The green sparks of Healing Wave burst forth, and though Jamus flinched with surprise, relief soon washed over him, overhealth soothing his pummeled joints.

"Dominus, I have received word from the north," another of the soldiers said, stepping forward to salute. "You are needed urgently. I regret to inform you that the situation has deteriorated, and our passage here was not as swift as it could have been."

"Seriously?" Anya asked incredulously. "You appreciate how hard I have to work to avoid turning you all into paste, right?"

"We fear no pain, only that your care for us should cause you to fail in your duty," the soldier said. He glanced at Jamus and the others briefly before continuing. "Dominus, please. We must go."

"Ahhh, it never ends," Anya griped, running a hand through her hair, then motioning the soldier back. "Okay, just give me a second." She jumped into the sky, and Jamus thought for a moment she intended to go off on her own. Instead, she landed atop her invisible platform and cupped her hands to her mouth.

"Attention!" she boomed as only a high-level awakened could, her voice crashing like thunder over the still-gathering crowd. "By the order of the Potentate, I bring you aid against the dark!" She gestured at Jamus and his party. "These four have been granted Vannon's Amnesty, and you will treat them as you would your equals! They are awakened, like the Guilder already given to your service, and they will aid you as he has! They are not to be harmed under any circumstance, for they are of interest to me, personally! Carry my words to the Legus, and remember who you are!"

With that, she fell back to the ground, impacting hard with a puff of dust. Waving a hand to clear it, she addressed them in a forceful whisper. "You *will* help, you hear me? The garrison's busy keeping the road open, so they won't risk their people unless the situation gets truly dire. These people aren't awakened, but don't think you can push them around. Hurt them or try to take advantage, and they'll kill you, no matter my orders and how many of them it takes. If you run off, you'll die to Scroungers and worse. Am I making myself clear?"

"Perfectly," Tarny said.

"Then we're done," Anya said, making a shooing motion. "Someone will come eventually to continue your interrogation."

They were quickly shuffled out of the ring of soldiers, their packs deposited with as little ceremony. Anya fixed them with one last warning look, then catapulted herself and her contingent into the twinkling sky.

There was a long, silent moment.

Finally, Staavo sucked his teeth and spat. "Well, that could have gone worse."

"I'm surprised we're still alive, personally," Tarny said, patting his pockets.

Shu remained subdued, studiously inspecting his own feet.

As the people surrounding them began returning to their feet, Jamus stiffened. "Careful," he warned his companions.

"Get to the packs before they do," Tarny whispered.

Seeing the sense in it, Jamus led the way, though the watchers seemed content to stare.

It was a fairly homogeneous bunch, beneath all the dirt and dust, with only a few examples of darker Osaran complexions. A few of the dirtiest among them, doubtless fresh from the mines, wore small glowing phials hung about their necks, filled with the same alchemical liquid as the globe trees. It was quite an uneven split in terms of gender, even for such a physically taxing trade as mining. Indeed, there were only a handful of women to be seen. No children either, for that matters.

Not families. Are they stationed here to serve as some type of indenture? Is this intended to become a quarry like the one to the north?

Don't tell me that that was done without awakened...

Unfortunately, the only person he could ask had a vested interest in remaining silent. The eyes of the crowd weren't the Eyes they needed to worry about. The notion that they'd been left to their own devices was patently ridiculous.

"Okay, we're at the packs," Staavo muttered under his breath. "This is ridiculous. I'm saying hello." He waved a hand at the still-shrinking ring and raised his voice. "Hey there! Anyone know a good pub?"

There was no response, only continued, intense staring. Or *glaring*, rather, as the looks certainly weren't friendly.

Staavo grunted, planting his hands on his hips. "Ah, stuff the lot of you. You heard her highness. You can't touch us, so quit your staring."

The expressions darkened, and Jamus quickly grasped Staavo's shoulder. "*Dominus Anya*," he corrected. "My companion apologizes for the flippant address. He did not mean to offend."

This didn't seem to help. If anything, it seemed to make things worse.

"I—" Tarny began, but the sudden clang of a bell from the west brought him up short. Heads snapped in that direction as the single peal became a repeated clamor. The crowd began to move around them, opening a path toward the sound and closing in behind them.

"So much for that pub," Staavo said, hoisting his pack with a grunt. "We've been up all night, you know. A little breakfast wouldn't be amiss."

"You will go now," said a voice from the crowd, its burly and particularly grubby owner stepping forward menacingly. He pointed with his pick. "Go!"

"Found your voice, have you?" Staavo asked.

"Come on," Jamus said, brushing past Staavo. The best way to win these people was to do as instructed, at least for now.

Grumbling, Staavo followed, and Jamus increased his pace to a jog, then a full run, the urgent ringing of the bell a song imminent threat.

As he ran, his thoughts outpaced his feet.

The townsfolk—residents—hadn't looked particularly concerned by the alarm. Angry, yes, frustrated, yes, perhaps even a little resigned, but not concerned. It was the surety of purpose. The surety that they, their *empire*, would prevail, even if they had to die to ensure it.

It was sickening.

He didn't have long to think on the subject before they reached the earthen wall and a logistical challenge. There was nothing nearby in the way of stairs.

Fortunately, there was magic for that.

"Keep going!" he called, stopping before stepping to the side and flinging out a hand. "Slap and jump!"

Staavo was first behind him and quick to guess his intent. The old man's hand clapped against his as he leapt, his springy artificial leg plus Levitation sending him soaring into the night. Tarny was next, and though he flubbed the timing, the spell was enough to get him sufficient altitude. His forward momentum carried him into the side of the barrier, and he began scrambling the rest of the way up. Shu did a little better, and then it was Jamus's turn after a brief retreat to rebuild momentum.

By the time Levitation deposited him atop the wooden planking, the others were already firmly grounded and staring out at the threat.

It wasn't a bone cat. A bone something, certainly, but different enough to be a new species. A bone ox, perhaps. Before he could ask, his ears caught the word 'Crusher' yelled by one of the defenders further down the line.

The name seemed appropriate, unlike Mining Outpost West Three. Half-again as big as the Scrounger, the creature had the same white plating and inverted-arrow-shaped head, but sported larger jaws strung with sinew. Its four legs were solid and bulky, like tree trunks capped with hammers of bone. Elsewhere, dark purple flesh bulged beneath plates too small to contain it, like a grown man trying to wear the armor of a child. Not that gaps made it seem more vulnerable.

The Crusher was presently subject to a hail of stones, some launched by slings, but most simply hurled by hand with the assistance of gravity. Those that hit, even ones large enough to shatter an aoaka's skull, were simply ignored. The torn remnants of a net were tangled about its neck, doing nothing to impede its silent prowling along the base of the sloping wall.

Apparently finding a spot it liked, it turned, retreated a few steps, and charged with a jump that carried it almost two-thirds of the way to the top in a single bound.

Jamus snapped up an arm, but Staavo got there first, his Glacial Nail digging into the back of the neck as it slammed into the slope. That and the following Arcane Bolt badly startled the catchpole-wielding guards who'd been rushing to intercept. The Crusher was startled too, but made no sound as it recoiled and rolled down the slope in a tumble of stones.

"Felt that, did ya?" Staavo yelled with an accompanying laugh, but the creature was already back on its feet and staring at them with its creepy slitted eyes.

"How much Health do these have?" Jamus asked the air at large. He loosed another Arcane Bolt—the first of many, he expected—though he held off on Overcharge for now. Tarny activated Winter, causing yet more startled yells and curses from assembled defenders.

"Lots," one of the catchpole wielders said, moving to stand beside Staavo with clear discomfort. The man's face was firm, but his knuckles were white as he gripped the shaft of his weapon. "It will be faster if you go down and kill it."

"I think we're fine up here, thanks," Tarny said, loosing an Ice Bolt. Shu also stood ready, but took no action, his hands clenched as tightly as his jaw.

"Strange of the Dominus to send us cowards," the catchpole wielder said. "If that thing gets up here, it will run rampant. The last one like it killed eighty-six before we brought it down. I know duty is a foreign concept to you barbarians, but have you no honor at all?"

"Is this guy serious?" Staavo asked, releasing another Glacial Nail, then swearing explosively when it missed—not because the Crusher had dodged or anything, but because it was running amok, lashing out against the wall in rage.

Stones were flying every which way from the pounding stomps of its forelimbs as it leapt, twisted, and charged, over and over again.

"Bring a net!" one of the other guards called, waving an arm.

"Do you have any heavier weaponry?" Jamus asked, a lightning whip crackling into existence in his left hand as power built in his right. "Crossbows? Limit Spikers?" He gave the creature another appraising look. "A ballista, perhaps?"

"Do you see a gods-damned ballista?" a man yelled with a grunt, heaving a melon-sized rock with both hands. More through luck than anything, it landed square on the Crusher's skull plate, but the prodigious force barely made it stumble.

"How about oil or pitch?" Tarny asked, still doing his part with Ice Bolt. "How do they like the taste of fire?"

"They don't burn, hells, they don't even breathe," said another of the defenders, cursing as the whole wall shuddered. The Crusher had hammered one of its limbs into the slope, planting it deep like a stake in the earth. The wall shook as it repeated this feat, hauling itself one step further.

"It figured it out!" came the cry. "It's coming up! Where is that damn net?!"

Jamus released his overcharged Arcane Bolt straight into the creature's bulging neck, making it do little more than flinch. The wall shook again, then again as the thing plodded upward, making steady progress toward the top. The bell was still ringing, its steady cadence a desperate plea to the night.

In range, Jamus swung powerfully with his Lightning Whip, lashing the Crusher across the proverbial nose. At the same time, a guard planted a catchpole against the side of its neck and shoved hard, his booted feet scrambling against the planks. Neither effort did much.

"Net here!" cried a miner, arriving with a net and immediately casting it over the bull-like monstrosity. "Grab on and hold! Hold even once it's killed you! Together now! Adamant Unbending!"

"ADAMANT UNBENDING!" came the answering cry of fervent insanity.

"Idiots! Let me through!" Staavo cried, having been shoved aside in the press.

Ropes snapped and tore as the creature continued its slamming climb, rocks showering from the now-closer impacts. Jamus threw out an arm, feeling the planks below him begin to shift as he lashed out over and over. There was no extra crackle of lightning with the impacts, the spell failing to find a proper target.

"Shit, it's going!" Staavo cried as the next crushing punch triggered a full-on landslide. Miners cried out in rage and terror as the fortifications slumped beneath them, the planked battlement collapsing to bring down foe and defender alike.

Levitation!

Throwing out a hand for Staavo in vain, Jamus cast the spell on himself, hovering in place as the ground fell away. Not even a second later, a tug and a flash made him gasp as he realized Tarny had actually *grabbed* his Lightning Whip. The Beacon's teeth were gritted with pain as the construct discharged against his Arcane resistance.

"No!" Jamus yelled, yanking with all his might and pressing on the whip with his will before dismissing it, knowing he had nowhere near the control required to prevent it from acting again in accordance with its nature.

Mercifully, the muscles of a Mage proved sufficient, hauling the shorter man into the air. Jamus caught him with a grunt and a swiftly applied coat of gravity-defying magic, the pair developing an uncontrolled spin. By the time they came around far enough for Jamus to catch a glimpse of the happenings below, the stones were painted red with blood, and on the next rotation, he saw a miner's torso sailing through the air, flung by an angry flick of the creature's pointed head. Dozens of defenders lay bleeding and broken, and those were just those visible atop the piled stones.

"Over here, you bony bastard!" Staavo challenged, proving that he at least had weathered the avalanche relatively unscathed.

Still tumbling, Jamus pushed Tarny away, flailing with his arms before canceling the magic. He landed painfully on his back, half sliding, half scrambling to his feet as he fought for footing.

"Here it comes!" Staavo yelled, and Jamus got up in time to see the old Spellsword standing firmly beside Shu. The latter stood silent and in position, hands braced and ready to repeat his trick of shaping Hard Light into a spear.

Ignoring the graceless impact of Tarny landing beside him, Jamus struggled forward, fearing it would not be enough. He called back his whip—for what little good it would do. He knew he was too late.

Shu's spear caught it right in the unsuspecting mouth and exploded into thousands of glittering shards. Ready for it after the experience with the Scrounger, Shu dropped to the ground, shielding himself with an angled ramp of light this time. Unfortunately and exactly as Jamus had feared, the power of the Crusher was too much despite the change in geometry. Even as it tripped, the ramp gave way beneath its stomping limb, and Shu's cry of pain was accompanied by the crunchy snaps of shattered bones.

At the same time as this was happening, Staavo spun to the side, bringing down his falchion with both hands on the passing monstrosity's neck in a masterfully attempted decapitation. Despite the shine of Light Cut and the gleaming crescent left by Slash, the blade only bit deep enough to be torn from his hands as the monster plowed straight past.

"El's well-trimmed hedge!" Staavo cursed, staggering to the side. He glanced at Shu before returning his focus to the monster. "You dying?"

Shu's only reply was a pained gasp.

"Jamus, Bulwark!" Tarny yelled, far off to the left but closing rapidly. He loosed an Ice Bolt to shatter against the Crusher's armored flank. "I'll distract it!"

The eyeless slits turned in the Beacon's direction, dark purple blood dripping from its neck to streak the plate armoring its shoulder. Staavo's sword was nowhere to be seen.

Showing cold intelligence, the creature ignored another Ice Bolt and turned again toward Shu and Staavo, picking the easier targets.

"No!" Jamus yelled, wishing he'd joined Rain on a few more runs. He called desperately for Arcane Bulwark, demanding that the magical wall appear far ahead of his fingertips rather than right at them as it had always done.

The hulking monstrosity had started its charge. It was going to be close. Too close. He was late again.

Summer bloomed over him—Tarny for some reason deciding that Health regeneration had a chance of helping in such a situation—but then Jamus's eyes went wide.

Tarny was too far. He couldn't be the source.

"RAAAAAAHHHH!" screamed a bulky, tattered figure, blowing past Jamus like he was standing still and raising a pair of wicked-looking axes high above his scarred bald head.

"What the—?" Staavo yelled.

The Crusher didn't abort its charge at the appearance of the new threat, but doubtless came to regret it as the blade of one of those axes hooked under its bony armor at the gap between shoulder and head. With enough grip strength to have torn a limb from a tree, the unknown Warrior held on, using his significant momentum to bodily haul the creature to the side as he swung onto its back. His other axe swung around to chop into the Crusher's neck, right where Staavo's sword had landed before and the bony plates were already streaked with purple.

Shu cried out as Staavo, weaponless, hauled him out of the way of the staggering conglomeration of man and bone beast. The first axe came free, and the crazy Warrior released it and switched to a one-armed bear hug, slinging around to cling to the underside of the creature's neck. The other axe was wrenched out, then brought back in with a dull *thunk*, digging deeper and sending dark purple blood spurting high into the air.

Jamus staggered to a halt, his Arcane Bulwark finally snapping into place but not occluding the scene enough to prevent the recognition that struck him.

There was only one person with scars that deep—enough that it seemed he was wearing a form-fitting armor made from a wicker basket. Only one person he knew to have Summer besides Tarny. Only one person so touched in the head as to enter melee with a thing like *that*.

"Jaks?!"

"Jamus!" the Vivificant answered, only to have the air crushed out of him in a wheeze as the beast slammed him to the ground beneath it. He kept hold of his axe and, with what little leverage he had, struck again and again and again.

"He's the Guilder Anya mentioned?" Staavo yelled, crouched by Shu, who was propped up and clutching his left arm.

"What are you two doing?" Shu hissed through his teeth, and at that point, Jamus noticed that the man's forearm seemed to have developed an extra joint. "Don't just stand there. Help him!"

"Yeah, probably a good idea," Staavo said, standing sharply. "You should splint that."

Tearing his eyes from Shu's injury, Jamus likewise stepped out from behind his barrier.

The Crusher was going absolutely berserk with pain, rolling and thrashing and slamming itself down on Jaks while he clung like a tick and brutally hewed away at its neck. "What's wrong?!" Jaks cackled, only to gasp as the wind was crushed from him for the umpteenth time. His bloody axe bit deep, chewing into dense muscle before the monster rose once more. Taking a deep breath, he swung again, continuing right where he left off. "Got a pain in your neck?"

Death's Defiance. Strength from Pain.

Jamus guided an Arcane Bolt around to land on the creature's rump, away from his unexpected ally. He remembered back to the one job he'd gone on with the man, back before Ascension had even been founded. The unhinged Vivificant actually got stronger the closer he was to death.

"Gotta say, wasn't expecting *you*," Staavo said, still without his sword and timing a Glacial Nail to land between axe swings.

Jaks couldn't reply, pinned beneath the creature's bulk at that particular moment.

Looking for a way to contribute beyond his magic, which wasn't doing much of anything, Jamus found himself still searching when the monster crumpled, crushing Jaks one last time but without any intent behind it. Its head lolled to the side, neck nearly chopped clean through, but that didn't stop Jaks from landing a few final hits for good measure. Only then did he relax, letting his arm fall to the side, the chipped axe falling from his fingers.

Hurrying forward, Jamus touched the Crusher's side, aiming to free the man beneath it with Levitation. However, his magic refused to find purchase on the alien monstrosity, despite the fact that it was dead. It took him, Tarny, and Staavo working together before Jaks was freed, lying there and panting with a deranged grin on his leathery face.

"You're welcome," he said, then coughed, hacking up a glob of red blood to mix the unspeakable mess coating him. His grin hadn't faded. "Dibs on the meat."