

A harsh, grating sound came from the gravel as I slumped down onto it. My foot paws were torn up and burning, and my body ached like fire from my long struggle. I glanced upward through sweaty hair, giving the REC17 a resentful look. The orange and red diesel engine had shoved me down the tracks for quite some time, relentlessly pushing me towards our destination. Fortunately, I had managed to stay on my paws for the whole time—who knows what would have become of me otherwise. I dropped my gaze again, looking underneath the train at the ruts I had gouged into the gravel; there seemed to be a few broken railroad ties as well.

I shifted one of my paws, looking at the ripped skin hanging off of the pads. There were a few splinters imbedded in them as well, compounding the soreness I felt. Reaching out, I began peeling away the loose, dead skin, picking out pieces of dead wood as I went. I winced, feeling uncomfortable and relieved at the same time. “Hurts so good,” I chuckled drily to myself.

All the same, I was alive and well; beat down, weary and scarred, sure, but there was no doubt I had grown stronger also.

In time, my ears perked up as I caught a sound. It was like that of thunder, or perhaps an earthquake, or some other terrible thing. Still sitting, I scooted to the side and took a peek around the REC17. As if on que, the faint blare of a distant horn sounded from the direction I was looking. In the distance, I could make out yet another diesel train, blue and yellow by the looks of it. I wondered if this one was for me as well. I didn’t see anybody else around, but I was still recovering from the last one; surely, I didn’t have to throw myself in front of this train as well.

I pulled a piece of paper out of my back pocket and studied it. Written upon it was a list of all the all the trains I would encounter—all the challenges I would face head on. Some of the items on the list were scratched off already, others were marked as only partially finished, and still others—many others, in fact—were blurry and difficult to make out. As I looked at this list, I saw a line begin to cross it, striking through “REC17 - Coaching: Spring Recreational Session, 2017.” Along with this, one of the faded items started coming into focus. It read “FNL17 - College: Spring Finals, 2017.”

“Ah, bloody heck...” I mumbled, looking back at the advancing train. Sure enough, as it came closer, I could make out its identification code: “FNL17.” Sighing, I lay down, finding the gravel strangely comfortable. “Do I have to?”

The list grew warm in my paw, and I lifted it to my sight to see what had happened. “Not necessarily, but it would be best; you know that,” it now read.

“Can I wait here just a bit and relax?”

Again, my paw felt warmth from the parchment. “For a short amount of time, yes. But remember: you must be prepared.”

I exhaled, dropping my paw back to the ground. I lay there for a while, enjoying act of laying down and resting. But as the sound of the FNL17 grew nearer, it became impossible to ignore, almost to the point of being nerve-wracking. However, I continued to rest, taking my sweet time, even as the train grew closer... and closer... and closer....

Finally, something in my head clicked into place, and my eyes snapped wide open. I suddenly felt as though I had been resting for too long, which I most certainly had been. "Gosh, blast it!" I exclaimed, slamming a fist on the ground. "Do I always have to wait until I'm under pressure?"

Rolling to my stomach, I pushed off the ground and hopped to my feet. They felt much better by now, and my body had stopped aching. I shoved the list back into my pocket, walking over to the other set of railroad tracks. Once there, I centered myself, shifted into a solid stance, and put my arms up, preparing myself at last to face the challenge ahead of me. I gazed tentatively, yet angrily, at the blue and yellow diesel; it was smaller than the REC, but unless my eyes were playing with me, it was going faster as well. I really didn't want to be here, but these were the tracks I had chosen, and I was going to stick to them. Laying my ears flat against my hair, I glared at the oncoming train, snarling in defiance against it.

"Come at me!" I barked.