

253: Plunge

Ameliah descended rapidly, leaping from aerial foothold to aerial foothold as she followed the line of broken trees. Unity came into range at around the same time as she spied the wreckage, and she immediately borrowed Detection. Following the signals to the shattered cockpit, she landed roughly, using her leftover speed to shove aside the tree trunk sitting across the vessel's nose.

"Just put your leg—" Rain's voice cut off as the tree rolled aside, revealing him in the process of freeing Staavo from his chair. "Oh, hey Ameliah. When's your birthday?"

"*What?*" Ameliah asked as she hurried toward Bluewash, her boots crunching through broken glass. The Coresmith was staring at her pitifully from within the twisted wreckage of what could have been a stairwell.

"Do not damage the frame," Tallheart rumbled, catching Ameliah's hand before she could touch the metal. "The enchantments are holding, but if they are damaged further, I will have to redo them."

"Seriously?" Staavo demanded. "We'll already have to redo them! The damage is done! Now, somebody get me the hells out!"

"Hi," Bluewash said to Ameliah with a half-hearted wave.

Ameliah sighed and waved back. Bluewash wasn't being crushed. She was just stuck. Looking more closely, it seemed she'd worked her way up from the stomach of the craft only to find herself blocked at the very end.

There was no fire or smoke, either. Rain must have dealt with it. Considering the damage to the forest, everything was remarkably intact.

"How'd you find us?" Rain asked, strain in his voice as he pulled on a strap. "Did Emerton see us go down and radio back?"

"Yeah," Ameliah said, shaking her head, then looking up for a moment to locate the circling Aeromancer. She waved, then flashed him a thumbs-up as a loud tearing sound announced Rain's victory over the fabric.

"Finally!" Staavo said, struggling free.

"Seriously, when's your birthday?" Rain asked. "My interface won't shut up until you tell me."

"Don't mind him," Staavo said, shattered glass tinkling to the ground as he shook out his jacket. "I think he landed on his head. Should have brought his helmet."

"I brought it," Rain said. "It was just stuck." Turning to her, he sighed. "My trick didn't work. The imprint must have decayed. Now, Ameliah, birthday, please."

Ameliah rolled her eyes. She could feel his mood. He was *happy*. The only negative emotion she felt in him was a vague disappointment—as one might feel over a broken toy and the inability to play with it anymore. Shaking her head, she decided she might as well get it over with. "Day after tomorrow."

"WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY ANYTHING SOONER!?" Rain roared.

"I was going to mention it a month ago, but I didn't want to distract you," Ameliah said with a smile. "And then I forgot. Now, can somebody explain what the hells happened?"

"The starboard rotor seized," Tallheart said. "I have yet to determine why."

"It seized because you tried to dodge that bird," Staavo said. "Emphasis on *'tried'*. We found the one damn bird in this whole swamp, and then we went and killed it."

"The bird's fine," Rain said. "I got it with Force Ward. Don't change the subject." He turned back to Ameliah. "Seriously? The day after tomorrow?"

Ameliah nodded. "I'll be twenty-seven."

"Is this really our priority right now?" Staavo asked.

Rain ignored him. "My birthday was the first of last month, so I guess I can't blame you for not telling me yours in a timely manner. In my defense, I only realized this like an hour ago. Oh, and I'm twenty-six. Want to have a combined party?"

"My birthday is the third of Frostfall," Tallheart rumbled. "I will be twenty-nine. I request my own party."

"Nineteenth of Seedlings," said Bluewash, shoving ineffectually at a beam. "Twenty-four."

"Staavo?" Rain asked as Tallheart nudged her aside.

"Lunatics, all of you," Staavo said, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Thirty-second of Promise. Older than dirt."

Tallheart rumbled in annoyance, planting his feet as he took a firmer grip on the wreckage.

"So be it." There was a tortured shriek of twisting metal as he hauled it out of the way.

"Come on out," Rain said, moving quickly to brace the other side.

"Inconvenient," Tallheart said with a sigh as Bluewash wriggled free.

"See?" Staavo said. "I told you the damage was done. The damn reactor better be intact, is all I have to say."

"Not that," Tallheart said. "It is the date that is inconvenient. I have less than two days. I must prepare gifts."

Ameliah let the laugh that had been building for a while now finally escape.

It's good to be back.

A few days after the airship incident, the excitement surrounding the captain's return was finally dying down, the last of it used up by the party.

For most, anyway. Not for Mlemlek Ko-Latti. Mlemlek Ko-Latti, Entrusted of Ascension and trader extraordinaire, had sensed opportunity, and opportunity was the doorway to success. Rule five.

"This is ridiculous," Halgrave said, straightening his legs and lifting Mlem's feet from the platform. The straps holding him to the goldplate's back creaked as they took up his weight—which was less than it had been for years, thank you very much.

"Pride is a luxury," Mlem said, wriggling to get comfortable.

"Another of your dumb rules?" Halgrave asked, taking up his enchanted hammer in one hand and a bulging gear bag in the other. So large was the bag, Mlem supposed the weight might even be balanced.

"Not this time," he said, stroking his mustache. "Though perhaps I shall add it to the list. It's certainly catchy. If you want a rule, then rule twenty-three: you'll never get rich by being slow. We can't wait for the airship to be repaired. If we're to establish ourselves in the city, we must do so before the Bank emerges from the fog like a Nattong to spike our hull."

"Like I even know what that is," Halgrave said with a grunt, walking out of the tent into the dappled sunlight. Their arrival was announced with a shriek of delight.

"You look silly!"

"Nonsense, Ava darling, this is a highly dignified and refined means of travel," Mlem said, trying and failing to bring his daughter into view as Halgrave carried him past the recovered airship toward the takeoff clearing. "Come around so I can see you and watch what you say. It would not do to offend my noble steed."

Halgrave surprised him, then, blowing out a breath of air in a passable horse impression, making Ava giggle in delight.

Mlem smiled. It was sometimes difficult to remember that Halgrave was a father too. Mahria was grown, but she'd have been Ava's age once. Perhaps the old goldplate would open up about his turbulent relationship with his daughter as they worked together. Perhaps not. Time would tell.

"When can I come after you?" Ava asked, skipping after them as they broke through the trees.

"Soon, I hope," Mlem said, letting his feet kick as they dangled. "Once I've made some connections and gotten us a place to stay. Perhaps a week or two."

"That's forever!" Ava whined.

"Now, now," Mlem said soothingly. "You'll be good for Auntie Meloni and Uncle Jamus, won't you? I'll call you tonight through the radio, supposing it works over such a distance, and through Rain's stone board if it does not. Now, we must be off. Preferably before anyone sees us and asks to have a turn."

"Too late," Halgrave grumbled unhappily.

"I don't want a turn, thanks," Vanna said from ahead, amusement in her voice. "You look ridiculous."

"Didn't you use to clean my floors?" Halgrave asked.

"Yes," Vanna deadpanned. "Amongst other menial and thankless tasks all across the city while you sat around in your office, eating grapes." Her face appeared as she leaned around Halgrave's shoulder to whisper to Ava. "He liked to spit the seeds under his desk."

"I should have stayed retired," Halgrave said tiredly as Ava laughed.

"Okay, go on, off with you," Vanna said. "Report in once you arrive, and keep a low profile until you hear from Burrik or the Entente."

"I will keep him out of trouble," Halgrave said. "Hold on tightly, Merchant."

"Remember to be smart while I'm gone, Ava," Mlem said, threading his hands through the straps. "Rule one is...?"

"You can't spend it if you're dead!" Ava replied happily, coming to eye level as Halgrave crouched down. "You remember too, daddy! I love you!"

Mlem smiled and winked. "I love you toOoOoOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

Rain barely noticed as Halgrave and Mlem shot out of Detection range, too busy running his fingers over the lair's membrane and observing the interplay of essence with all of the senses available to him. Unfortunately, that didn't include Mana Sight, as Ameliah was busy with the crafters today. He could still guess how the environmental mana was flowing, though, as one might guess a river's flow by inspecting its dry banks. It wasn't the same as seeing it, but he couldn't be too upset.

He was still learning buckets, and he hadn't even gone through yet.

Without turning, he cleared his throat. "Nobody going to interrupt me? Normally, this is when someone interrupts me."

Only then did he look over his shoulder. Past the distortion of the slowly forming aura anchor behind, he saw the rest of his party assembled and waiting. Bluewash looked tired but eager, hovering near the door. Sana, beside her, was almost the exact opposite, fresh-faced but uncertain. Carten just looked bored, lounging near the racks of scuba gear.

"I would, but..." Bluewash said, glancing at Sana. "I'm not sure what questions I can ask. You know. In front of an Aspirant."

"Ah," Rain said, turning to face them, partly to get a better look at the lazy flow of essence within the room. "Good. You're sticking to the rules. In this case, though, you don't need to worry about it. Sana is a specialist. When it comes to essence and souls, she has full clearance, just like you. Likewise, Sana, you've got clearance for anything lair-related. Tarny didn't cover that in the brief?"

"He didn't," Bluewash said, glancing at Carten. "And what about...him?"

"Not wearin' these fer show," Carten said with a snort, tapping the three pips on his breastplate's collar.

"Yes, but—"

"Oi!" Carten interrupted, uncrossing his legs as he sat up. "What are you tryin' to say? Think I can't keep a secret?"

Rain smiled as Bluewash bought it, hook, line, and sinker.

"Sorry, no, I didn't mean... I'm sure you can be discreet"—her voice dropped to a mumble—"when you want to."

Carten's brows drew together, and his expression darkened like a thunderhead. This was ruined somewhat by the barest hint of a grin through his bushy beard.

Bluewash clearly didn't notice from the way she continued in a rush. "It's just that I just don't know if you need to know, you know?"

"Bah," Carten said, leaning back with a disgusted huff. "I'm on the Council of Souls. Are *you* on the Council of Souls?"

"We have a Council of Souls?" Bluewash asked, blinking.

"You can stop teasing her, Carten," Rain said, smiling and returning his attention to the lair membrane. "Tarny didn't cover this either?"

Bluewash hesitated. "He probably planned to, but..."

"But you asked so many questions he never got a chance," Rain finished for her. "Did you at least get through the Uncommon Knowledge articles?"

"Uh, mostly."

Rain chuckled. "Okay, let's see. The Council of Souls. The Council's job is to push the boundaries of what we know about the metaphysical and to decide what is and isn't safe to share more broadly. The Council's existence is secret from the lower ranks, hence no pin, but Entrusted know about it and are allowed to know everything in those articles. I won't say everyone's read them. As for our other specialists, Halgrave and Velika have the same need-to-know exception you do. If we add more specialists later, they won't have clearance by default, so watch it. If in doubt, keep your mouth shut. Standard privileged-info procedure. No talking about any protected topic unless it's part of a mission or an official discussion related to said topic. All clear?"

"Yes," Bluewash said after a long pause.

Rain smiled. He could feel her questions fighting with each other as they battled to be the first out of her throat. He sympathized completely. "Today's activity is just such a mission," he said before any of them escaped. "We'll be working with everything in *Uncommon Knowledge: Souls*, *Uncommon Knowledge: Essence*, *Uncommon Knowledge: System*, and *Uncommon Knowledge: Lairs*. My mission to the Great Delving involved gathering essence. As a side effect of that process, Ameliah and I have vastly progressed our capabilities in sensing it. The only other person who even comes close is Sana."

"Oh," Bluewash said, distracted as if something had finally clicked. "That's why everyone says you're so good with magic?"

"Everyone...says..." Sana looked like she was about to curl in on herself. "People talk about me?"

Rain smiled. "At least you don't have a nickname."

"Ooh, ooh, ooh!" Carten said. "I've got an idea!"

"No," Rain said loudly. "Getting back to the mission, today, we're exploring the lair. Sana and I are the observers, and Bluewash, as the lair expert, will tell us if our observations mesh with what she already knows. Carten's job is to make sure we remember to breathe and to provide color commentary. Carten, pass out the tanks, please."

"Color what?" Bluewash asked as Carten got to his feet.

Rain turned, spreading his arms to encompass the lair. "Before we go in, I observe that this is a soul. Standing here looking at it is like standing in the Liminal Void looking at a person. It's like...it's projecting itself into our reality the same way we form projections over there. It has a clearly-defined bronze-level paling, made of ordered essence and laced through with system gunk. Do you see the same, Sana?"

"Not really," Sana said, eying the tank Carten was holding ready for her warily. "It does look like a soul, but I can't pick out the threads you keep talking about. I wanted to ask you about that. I've been practicing, but I just can't see them, even inside myself. Do you think it's my level?"

"Maybe," Rain said, wiggling a hand as Sana finally allowed Carten to help her don the tank. "I don't think it depends on how much essence you've got, but it might come down to rank and

arrangement. We'll talk about it later, as it touches on things the Council hasn't cleared yet. Anyway, Blue, first question: do lairs have souls?"

"They *are* souls," Bluewash said, and Rain took a moment to admire her for answering in lieu of asking a question of her own. He wasn't sure he could have managed the same in her shoes.

In retrospect, he should have given her a lot longer to digest the content of the articles. Scheduling was hard.

Electing to just push on, he shook his head. "And how do you know? Does one of your skills tell you, or were you taught?"

"It's what I was taught," Bluewash said, slipping on her tank with practiced ease. "Lairs are souls without mind or body, just as monsters lack the former and have the latter. They are held together by *Me'ke-Tar Tek*—the paling, as your article called it, though it said people had them, not lairs. I thought that was a mistake." She hesitated. "Am I allowed to ask a question?"

"You just did," Rain said. "Go ahead. You can have another one."

"Right..." Bluewash said. "So you two can just...see each other's souls? Like, physically see them? What does a soul even look like?"

"Like that," Sana said. She pointed at the lair. "Yours is red. Also, that was three questions."

"Red?" Carten said as Rain smiled. "That jus' seems wrong. You messing with me?"

"She isn't messing with you, and yeah, red," Rain said. "I would have guessed it would be at least blue-adjacent, but no. Deep ruby red—and metallic, since she's silver. You've been slacking, Carten. You should be able to at least see the general shade of souls by now."

"Yeah, yeah," Carten said. "Busy working on the rest of it."

"Oh, color commentary," Bluewash said, suddenly snapping her fingers. "I get it."

"You really don't," Sana said as Rain choked on a laugh.

"Here you go, Captain," Carten said, grinning openly and holding up a tank with the straps spread wide. "Arms through."

"Thanks," Rain said, complying. The still-forming aura anchor moved out of the way at his direction, the fragile matrix of magic easily sheltered from the disruptive influence of the metal by his adamantine will. "Anyway, back to the subject of the lair. Bluewash and Carten are the only ones who've been in there, so they'll take the lead once we're through. We won't be fighting anything, so don't worry about that. Bluewash, what's the skill called? The one that lets you access the core now that you've already gotten to it once?"

"Core Access," Bluewash said. "It's well-named. Can I ask another question?"

"Just one more, and ask Sana," Rain said, inspecting the regulator. "I need to figure this thing out, and we need to start soon if I'm to be back in time for my next meeting."

"Didn't you give Tallheart the plans?" Carten asked.

"The *concept*, and that doesn't mean I've gone scuba diving," Rain said, taking an experimental breath. The valve opened easily as he inhaled, then cut off again as he breathed out.

Tallheart is a damn genius.

Taking a few more test breaths and probing with Detection, Rain made sure he understood how his equipment functioned inside and out. Meanwhile, he listened with half an ear as Bluewash asked not one but several questions about people-palings and Sana did her best to explain. Before things got completely off the rails, he shifted the regulator to the crook of his elbow and clapped his hands. "In we go."

"But—"

"I'll reiterate," Rain said, starting to feel a little impatient. "Step one is to *observe*. There'll be plenty of time for questions and answers when we talk to the Council tomorrow. I know I've got quite the list of them already. When we're in there, since we're all going to sound like chipmunks, let's stick to hand code. Lastly, remember this is a *lair* we're going to be exploring. Just because there won't be any monsters, it doesn't mean it's safe. I'll protect you, but it's about keeping good habits."

Hesitantly, Sana raised her hand.

"Yes?" Rain asked. Given that he was all but broadcasting his desire to get on with it, whatever she wanted to know had to be important.

"Lairs don't have the damage limit, right?" she asked as she brought her hand back down.

"What happens if one of these tanks blows up?"

"They don't, and they won't," Bluewash said. "Can I ask—?"

"Hold on," Rain said, cutting her off and smiling at Sana reassuringly. The Watch officer was hiding her unease, but with how far he'd come, the defenses that had given him so much trouble before might as well not have been there. "It will be fine," he stressed, reaching behind his neck to tap his tank with a finger. "Tallheart made these like six times as strong as they need to be, and Carten and Bluewash have used them many times. Neither of them has exploded, to my knowledge. On top of that, I'll be using inverted Immolate to suppress sparks. On top of *that*, I've got Wards. I said I'd protect you, and I meant it."

"It's just my first lair, you know?" Sana said. She shook her head, then slapped her cheeks with both hands. "I'm being silly. Let's do this."

Rain grinned as he turned to face the barrier, then spoke calmly as he stepped through.

"Leeroy Jenkins."