

267: Downed

"Jamus!"

At Tarny's cry, Jamus looked up to see the man haphazardly sliding toward him down the side of a dune. The Beacon's brown hair looked almost singed in the ruddy light of the sunset, their passage east and sudden descent having hastened its arrival.

Returning to the other man's wave, Jamus returned his attention to his hastily stuffed pack, less stuffed now with half the contents spread around him on the sand. He'd already gone through it all and was in the process of repacking it with some semblance of order. He'd only been down for five, maybe ten minutes, and already, sweat beaded his forehead. The oppressive heat only worsened as Tarny drew within thirteen meters, Summer's effect settling over him like a downy blanket.

"Did you see the others land?" Tarny asked, cursing as he struggled through the loose sand.

"I was the first down," Jamus said, gesturing to the shredded remains of his harness. "I had a little trouble with my equipment. Had to cut my chute and do the landing the terrifying way. A pity no one saw it, as I cannot claim the points I earned for style by catching my hat."

"Wish I had a hat," Tarny said, puffing as he came to a stop. "Even going down, this sun is brutal. Do you think I can still get sunburn with a thousand health?"

"I do not know," Jamus said. "Speaking of health, are you using Summer for a reason, or have you just not bothered to change it?"

"Rolled my ankle on the landing, fell hard, and now I've got sand in my everywhere. Joint feels fine after the ring trick, but I've got a few hundred points to build back. How about you? You hurt?"

"Bruised, but not badly enough to spend health fixing it," Jamus said, gesturing to his earring. "With boosted Recovery, I should recover, and I would prefer to buffer any additional damage I might receive in the meantime." He stopped short of mentioning the fact he was missing more health than Tarny had to begin with.

"Just how terrifying was this landing of yours?" Tarny asked, shaking sand from his jacket and stooping to see to his own pack.

"It was not that," Jamus said, finished with his and tying it shut. "Have you ever been punched in the spine by a titanium propeller? Having experienced this, I would not recommend it."

"Ooph," Tarny said, looking around at the scattered wreckage peppering the sand. "Well, between you and the ship, it looks like you won the fight."

"Mmm," Jamus said, rising to stretch, before pointing to twisted wreckage of the tail protruding at an angle where it had fallen. "We should consider doing something about the larger pieces."

"The sand will shift with the wind soon enough," Shu said, approaching from the opposite direction as Tarny. "We should not linger and risk discovery." He turned to Tarny. "Why are you using Summer? Are you injured?"

"Mildly," Tarny replied. "I'll switch to Fall once I'm topped off."

"You should switch now," Shu said. "It is not for lack of health that we will die in this place. It will be through capture or dehydration. I did not see a source of water on my way down. Did you?"

"No, not that I had the presence of mind to look," Jamus said with a frown. "I have two skins. Perhaps a liter in total."

"I brought the jug," Tarny said, extracting an enormous metal canteen from his pack with a grunt and planting it in the sand. It was one of the ones Tallheart had made during his Vestvall delve. "I didn't have room for much else, but I figured we'd want it. Twenty-five liters should last us a bit."

"Not forever," Shu said. "I did not train here, but I have heard many complaints from those who did. Heat, thirst, and bitter cold in the dead of night. Does Fall replenish the water that our bodies will turn to sweat and urine?"

Tarny hesitated, and Summer's heat vanished to be replaced with Fall's strange mix of fullness and decay. "That's a good question," he finally said, looking at his invisible interface. "The exact words are 'Reduces the need for food and water, so...maybe? It's not something I've thought to test. I can't remember the last time I've had to pee.'"

Jamus frowned, not because of the water issue, but from the chilling knowledge that Tarny did *not* have Purify.

I hope everything still works.

"How have you not tested your skill?" Shu asked incredulously. "What happens beyond one hundred percent?"

Tarny shook his head. "I can't tell you because it won't *go* beyond one hundred percent, even with Aura Focus. We—Rain and I—think it removes your body's need for fuel rather than *providing* fuel. A subtle distinction but an important one. He borrowed it from me and boosted it beyond all reason, but neither of us proceeded to blow up to resemble Bakal." Tarny chuckled. "It is a powerful skill, to be sure, but one with a low ceiling. The inverted effect seems to have no limit beyond resistance, but that is literally the opposite of what we need here."

"It may still work," Jamus said, rubbing his chin. "Aquifer can create water, and drinking it will not kill you. Fall should be the same. Regardless, we should try to do as little sweating as possible. If it is truly cold at night, that is when we should travel. Presuming we elect to travel, of course."

"We need to find Staavo and go," Shu said. "He looked to be on a path to land near me, but I chose to come here first. I had assumed he would do the same. Since he is not here, he could be injured, or he could be having trouble for a reason I had not considered until now. I do not think the blade foot he was wearing will work properly in this sand. "

Jamus frowned. "He has another prosthetic that works with a boot, but I don't know that he brought it on the mission to begin with. If he's not here by now, then that could be the reason for his tardiness." He shook his head, then used Levitation and began floating gently upward. "Let me see if I can locate him."

"There you are, you towering carrot!" Staavo's yell came almost immediately. "Get over here and help your elder up this damn dune!"

"Found him," Jamus said, canceling the spell and dropping back down so he could turn in the direction of the voice.

"I'll go," Tarny said, already moving before Jamus's feet touched the sand.

"We'll all go," Shu said, hefting the water canister. "There is no reason to remain now that we have found each other, and there is every reason to flee."

"Agreed," Jamus said, taking another survey of the wreckage. Until the sand buried it—if it buried it, for he remained skeptical about that—it would stand out from above. It wasn't likely that anyone had seen their fall, but that was no call to stay around and find out.

The swearsy reunion with Staavo went roughly as expected. The old scholar didn't have his spare foot, but was able to get around well enough, his slowness resulting from the need to pad his prosthetic with a torn shirt to stop it from sinking into the sand. It wasn't ideal, but he was awakened, and his age hadn't yet robbed him of physical toughness and agility well beyond that of a baseline unawakened.

After a short walk to clear the obvious debris field, they hunkered down in the shadow of a dune to discuss their options. Even in the shade, the heat was still oppressive, radiating up from the baked sand.

"So, walk out, or stay and wait for rescue?" Staavo started them off, already having caught up on the discussion before he'd arrived.

"Walk, not that it matters," Shu said. "There will be no rescue here."

"Now, don't be so hasty," Tarny said. "Rain had a plan for us. Jamus, what was his exact instruction before it was cut off?"

Jamus pursed his lips as Winter hit him unbidden. He helped it along by shifting a few points of Focus to Clarity, the burst of Overmana snapping his hasty decoding of Rain's message back to crystal clarity. "His exact words were: 'The anchor is almost dead. Find an isolated spot in the desert, and—'" he gestured sharply across his throat with a finger. "And that was it. Not a dot or dash more for me to guess the next letter."

"Find an isolated spot in the desert...and land? And wait? And fix the ship?" Tarny asked, replacing Winter with Fall again.

"Possibly any of those," Jamus said as the illusory chill retreated. He turned to Staavo. "How long do you think it would take Tallheart to complete the *Incredible* now that he has our plight to motivate him? The second ship's the only option I see. Ameliah could switch to Translocationist, but she'd never get across the border."

Staavo sucked his teeth. "Well, it was two weeks from finished before the antlered lummoX got distracted with his fancy new metal. He seems to like you, though, Jamus, so...a day or two? Whatever else he is, the man is a legend. Don't tell him I said that." He grunted. "That's two days not including the proving flight and inspections, mind you."

"Rain won't let them skip those," Tarny said. "He wouldn't risk another ship, and you remember what he had ours put through. No, a week was the number he put on the table when we discussed holding off until the second ship was ready. He was torn. On the one hand, you know how much he likes redundancy. On the other hand, he wanted our report on the Empire and the Maelstrom before his conversation with the Watch. The council ultimately made the call to go ahead. The right call, I think, even standing here in boots full of sand and

regret. The situation is worse than we thought, and Rain now knows that." He looked around. "Can anyone explain why we went down? It's clear the enchantments failed, but what caused them to fail? And what caused our fuel to degrade? How is that even possible?"

"Essence bullshit," Staavo said. "That failure was nothing we could have foreseen or planned for. We knew skills would fail from the story of that Guilder who bulled his way in here, Alrich or whatever, but that was supposed to be *in* the storm, and there was nothing about equipment." He clicked his tongue. "Let me amend that. We could have planned for it by bringing someone who can actually see essence, not just sense it vaguely. Sana, for example." He turned to Jamus. "Did you feel anything with magic literally unraveling around us? I didn't."

"No," Jamus said unhappily. "I think our domains prevented the phenomenon from touching us, just as they protected our equipment. Maybe I would have noticed the disruption had I been meditating, but no. As it was, there was no warning."

"What are we talking about?" Shu asked. "What do you mean by 'domain'?"

"Council of Souls nonsense," Staavo said, waving a hand. "Classified below Entrusted, blah blah blah, don't care. Your domain is the range where you can override the will of the world. The volume around you where you can stop mana from sinking into metal, that kind of thing."

"I see," Shu said.

"No, you don't," Staavo said. "That would be just Rain, Tallheart, Ameliah, and Sana." He paused to glare at Tarny. "Who is not here."

Tarny sighed. "She didn't come for the same reason we didn't wait. The Watch situation isn't something Rain wanted to jeopardize, and she's our only link to—"

"She's not the only link, and you know it," Staavo interrupted. "*Something* happened with the Warden once Rain broke her spell over him, and he's doing a shit job of being coy. Where else is he pulling all that class information from, eh? She either left him everything she knew, or her brain ghost's still in his head. I think it's the second, because no book or whatever could have convinced him this scouting mission was a good idea."

"We are getting off track," Tarny said hotly. "Sana is not here, and you don't *need to know* what may or may not be in Rain's head."

"Is the captain compromised?" Shu asked.

Staavo laughed. "Talk to him for ten seconds and you'll know he's still himself."

"Our mission now is getting home," Tarny stressed, ignoring them both. "Rain's mission is getting us home. Find an isolated spot *and wait for rescue* is the most logical continuation to his sentence, and I vote that's what we should do."

"Bah," Staavo said. "Mission's not over. We didn't learn shit."

"You are proposing we walk back to the Maelstrom, then?" Shu asked. "I vote against that plan."

Staavo rolled his eyes. "Nobody is suggesting that. Talking to the locals might get us something, though. It is better than waiting for a rescue that might not come. There any villages around here we can infiltrate?"

"That is a bad idea," Shu said flatly.

Staavo gestured, "For us, yeah, but you've got a shot at blending in."

Shu was already shaking his head. "I do not. Undama do not simply wander from place to place. A stranger is a spy, to be detained, interrogated, then executed."

Jamus blinked. "That seems excessive."

"Not compared to the punishment for a traitor," Shu said.

Jamus grimaced.

"Waiting a day doesn't preclude any other plan," Tarny said diplomatically. "If we can find water and shelter along the path we took, even a week won't be a problem. We'll have to set up some kind of signal so the rescue ship can find us."

Shu was shaking his head again. "Any signal we made could be seen by an aerial patrol just as easily as by our allies, and do not doubt that a patrol will come eventually. The fact that a Guilder pierced the border will still be fresh in the Lightbreaker's mind, and even were that not the case, smugglers, drug runners, and dissident communes can pop up anywhere. A patrol *will* come."

"So, we're screwed," Staavo said dryly. "I'll just lay down here, then. Could use a good nap."

Jamus raised a hand. "Staavo, please. Shu, how many scouts will there be in one of these patrols? If—when—they find this wreckage, what will they do?"

"It will likely be only one, a Hound with Flight and perception skills. Upon seeing the anomaly, the Hound will report to their Sereni, who will task Eyes to sweep the area from afar. If we are not found immediately by this, the Sereni will then allocate forces to secure the site. Once here in person, the Eyes will Divine our prior presence, and a different Hound with a tracking focus will be dispatched to follow our trail."

He stood, looking somehow even less happy than he'd appeared so far. "We could not escape this, for we have neither skills for rapid movement nor those to mask our passage. We could not kill our pursuer, for they would not pursue alone. Knives would accompany them. I have changed my thinking. We should not leave. We should return and bury the wreckage immediately. Rapid action is our only course. If our fall was seen, we are dead and there is no changing it. If it was not, there is still hope, but it burns as we stand here."

"I find my mind changed as well," Jamus said, rising beside Shu and touching his earlobe. "I doubt I'll be able to Levitate any of the larger pieces, not with them being mostly metal, but I can bolster my Strength and dig." He took his hand away to hold up a palm. "Before anyone asks, no, Levitation does not work on sand. Not unless you mean a single grain."

"How long do we have?" Staavo asked.

"There is no way to know," Shu said. "If patrols could be predicted, they would be of little use. Perhaps a month. Perhaps a day. Perhaps less."

"What if we take out the Hound?" Tarny asked. "Silence them before they can report back. They won't be in Message range out here, probably."

Shu shook his head. "Even if the Hound somehow did not see us before we saw them, and even if we managed to kill them before they escaped, a missing scout would be noted within

the day. It would only delay our discovery." He looked toward the crash site and hesitated for only a moment before starting to walk. "We should be digging as we discuss this."

"My favorite," Staavo said, clambering up to follow. "Manual labor."

"What about catching the scout, not killing them?" Tarny asked, falling into step. "Let's say the scout lands to get a closer look, and we jump them. Then we...bribe them or something."

Staavo barked a laugh, patting his pockets. "Shit. Left my coin in my other pants."

"I admit it's not a great plan," Tarny said. "I'm just throwing out ideas here."

"I have one, in that case," Jamus said, his boots leaving the ground as he once more used Levitation. "I will look for water while you three assess the work, for we still have not settled that issue. With none of us skilled in Geomancy, I fear this will be the labor of days. It would be most fortunate if Fall turned out to satisfy our needs, but that is not how today has gone. If there is no water within my sight, I will return to assist— Oh."

"What?" Staavo asked, his voice suddenly thick with alarm.

"It is a thing," Jamus said, lowering his voice and paddling at the air to turn himself for a better view over the dunes as he canceled his ascent. "Some type of monster. Nothing I recognize. It hasn't seen me."

He narrowed his eyes, taking in details in the failing light. The creature was bestial, with four legs and a three-segmented body armored by white plates of what could have either been bone or carapace. Beneath that, its skin was either black or a very dark purple, bulging with muscle at the joints. Its head was equally armored, he saw as it glanced to the side, crowned

by an arrow-like plate ending in two sharp points. By overall body plan, it reminded him most of a jungle cat, but that was a poor comparison. It was really unlike anything he could put a name to.

It was a hunter, though; that was clear enough. Its motion was eerily smooth as it stalked through the wreckage, almost seeming to glide across the sand.

"What are you, an amateur?" Staavo hissed up at him in a whisper, accompanied by the soft sound of a drawn sword. "What's its name and level?"

"I would have told you if I could see either," Jamus hissed back as he lowered himself to barely peek above the dune. He measured up the distance again, and his frown only deepened. The thing, meanwhile, had gone still. He didn't think it had heard them. They'd been talking much more loudly before. And yet, it was now plainly on alert.

It cannot be human unless it is a Shifter. Does the Empire employ shifters? Could it be an animal?

"This should not be a ranked zone," Shu said. "What does it look like?"

"I— You're about to find out!" Jamus started in a whisper, becoming a cry as the whatever-it-was quivered, then snapped its head to look in his direction. Its eyes were hidden, but he could feel them lock onto him from within arrowslit-like gaps in its bony fortress of a skull. A chill ran through him at that gaze, a nameless, primal fear running through him and shaking him in a way he could not name.

Two razor-like mandibles fell open beneath that horrible face, hinting at a yawning maw before snapping shut with a splintering *clack*.

