

156: Magnet

The Bastion hadn't fallen, despite Dozer's fears. When Rain's soul had ruptured, the slime had felt the entire structure shake, buffeted like a dinghy in a hurricane. By the time Rain had made it inside, things had settled down, but outside, the chaos had changed. It was hotter and more turbulent, but also thinner, which Rain hadn't taken as a good sign.

Since he'd arrived, Rain hadn't noticed the chaos thinning any further, but that didn't mean he was safe. For all he knew, his paling had burst like a balloon. If that were the case, then the Bastion would be the only thing keeping his consciousness from dissolving away completely. The chaos outside might not be his at all, but rather the ambient essence in the Ashen Jungle. That would have explained the heat.

Also, Snek was gone. Rain wasn't sure whether the wayward avatar had been swept out of his soul or had simply dissolved over time. Either way, he had to hope that at least some of his paling was still intact. If it wasn't, then the chances were good that he was utterly screwed.

Rain grimaced, pushing aside his worries for the umpteenth time. He was currently piloting his airship via Stubs, seated in the cramped cockpit and staring out through the windshield as he pedaled himself forward. The propulsion system was entirely manual, copying the forgewagon's drive train—more or less—out of essence. Instead of treads, there was a prop situated behind him at the airship's tail. It was turning quickly at the moment, thanks to the aggressive gear ratio he'd selected. For steering, he had rigged up a bunch of levers, connected to various exterior flaps by cables or direct mechanical linkages. In general, Kludge-1 lived up to its name.

The airship was poorly thought-out, shoddily built, questionably aerodynamic, and ugly, both inside and out. It was more like a lumpy potato than the sleek craft Rain had first envisioned. It was working, though, which was nice.

As for why it needed a propulsion system in the first place, Rain would have *loved* to have been able to just *will* himself forward, but that didn't work out here. Within the Bastion, sure, he could fly around to his heart's content. Adrift in the chaos, however, his control extended to the skin of his craft and no further. There was nothing to push off except the chaos, and it was mostly immune to his mental efforts. It did respond to physics, however. Rain had opted for a fan instead of Dozer's method, which was, not to put too fine a point on it, fart-based.

Even with the fan, Rain hadn't been able to find a way to get it to turn on its own. He could move essence around with his mind easily enough, but that didn't mean he could just spin a prop with any sort of speed. Turn it, sure, but fast? Not so much. The gearing was important, and using his avatar to apply the force was little different than doing so directly. Pedal power was where it was at, at least for now. He'd revisit the problem once he figured out how to make essence into jet fuel.

There were other solutions, of course—Rain had considered making either an aquatic or an avian avatar, for example. He'd discarded such ideas. Firstly, he'd already half-completed the airship, and secondly, he hadn't wanted to risk going outside unprotected. The airship's hull put a comforting layer of hardened essence between him and the chaos.

Or at least it would have, had the ship not been leaking.

Taking an arm away from the controls, Rain focused. Slowly, the chaos-fogged air began to clear, the orange gas concentrating above one of the pirate hooks that he'd added to the end of his avatar's arms. He turned his thoughts to purifying the growing orb, and the color began to lighten. Working with gases was tricky—the chaos, particularly—but his skill was improving. He couldn't do this at range, even within the Bastion, but the cabin of Kludge-1 was tiny enough for him to manage.

Sensing that there was enough gathered, Rain tightened his will further. The compacted gas became first liquid, then solid, falling to the floor as a marble of pure white essence to join its fellows in rattling about beneath his chair. There were dozens of them down there.

He'd been at this for a while.

Rain sighed, taking his feet from the pedals and leaving the craft to drift.

I really should fix the seals...

Shaking his head, he sent his mind back to the Bastion, far, far behind him. Appearing in his core, he looked around, making sure that everything was still okay.

It was. The Bastion still stood. The chaos outside was calm. Dozer was still asleep.

Good.

Rain hopped back to Stumps, looking through the windshield to his dollar-store anemometer. It was nothing more than a scrap of fabric tied to a spar that jutted from the nose of Kludge-1

like the horn of a narwhal. The essence-fabric was snapping vigorously in the chaos at the moment, pointing slightly upward and off to the right.

“Getting faster...” Rain said, though his voice came out more like the dying wheeze of a rotting corpse. His avatar’s vocal cords definitely needed work, but that was WAY down on the priority list.

Using his hooks, Rain adjusted the position of a few levers, turning Kludge-1 until the pennant was pointing straight ahead. He resumed pedaling, but unlike every time before, he found himself unable to make the pennant reverse direction. The current was now faster than he could spin his prop.

Shit.

Rain peered out through the windshield in concern. The last thing he wanted was to slam into his piling at speed, or—maybe worse—to be sucked out through the hole. He wasn’t sure what would happen if an avatar bearing his consciousness were to exit his domain. It wasn’t something he wanted to test. He’d switch back to his core before he let that happen.

He slowed his pedaling, then stopped altogether, letting the current carry him as he used the levers to control his attitude, watching the pennant. The wind was still getting stronger, and quickly. The entire craft shook, groaning alarmingly as the pennant whipped and snapped more violently by the moment. Rain’s googly-eyes widened, watching as it tore free from the spar.

This is bad!

Frantically, he worked at the levers, trying to control the tumbling craft, focused wholly on keeping his view pointed straight ahead so he could see. The chaos in front of him was changing color, shifting from orange to a muddy purple as he hurtled forward. Quickly, that purple became blue as the chaos cleared and his paling became visible. It stretched before him in all directions, a wall so vast that it appeared to be uncurving. Its blue light cut through the rushing chaos, allowing Rain to see further than he'd ever seen before, but he had eyes only for the tear.

It was enormous.

A gaping slash in the blue wall of energy, stretching above and below him like a scar.

The current was sweeping him directly for the center.

"Shit!" Rain wheezed, returning his feet to the pedals. He pumped his stumpy legs with all his strength as the craft around him shook wildly. He tried to aim the nose away from the tear, but one of the control surfaces tore away, sending him tumbling entirely out of control. With no other options, he jumped back to his core. After a few moments of jarring stillness, Rain winced, his awareness of Stumps vanishing like a thread, snapped.

There would be no retrieving that particular avatar.

Well then.

The fearful yellow light of Rain's core mellowed to blue as he spread his senses through the Bastion, checking to make sure everything was still intact. As far as he could tell, nothing had changed. Dozer was still asleep, safe in his crate. Looking outside, the chaos didn't seem to be any thinner than it had an hour ago. There was another pennant on a spar out there, protruding from the recently-added airship dock. The flag hung mostly limp, buffeted by the chaos, but only occasionally pointing in the direction of the tear.

Rain's core began to yellow again as he watched the flag, considering.

If the Bastion is drifting...

Before the color of worry could fully take over, Rain focused. His core shifted from dirty yellow to deep ruby, glowing with determination.

Not if I have anything to say about it. Time for Kludge-2.

Rain sat up sharply, folding at the waist. "Okay, so—"

"Ah!" Ameliah yelled, leaping away from him. He wasn't even able to get out his own cry of surprise before she turned around and tackled him with a resounding clang.

"I told you not to do that!" she cried, a hitch in her voice. "You idiot."

Rain coughed, finding his throat incredibly dry. "Ameliah, what...? Oh." *Shit.* He flicked on his HUD, saw it was past 7 PM, then winced. *Ten hours. They must have been worried sick.*

"Tallheart! He's back!" Ameliah yelled, her voice deafening in his ear.

Rain heard steady footsteps, and he turned his head as much as he could to see Tallheart's feet approaching. His visor had been slammed closed by the force of Ameliah's tackle, limiting his field of view, and he couldn't get an arm free to raise it. He was still glad to be wearing the armor, though. He was sure that he'd be having trouble breathing without it. His head felt a little light as it was, even without having the life crushed out of him.

"Are you dying?" Tallheart asked, coming to a stop in front of Rain.

Rain blinked, looking up at him. "No. I think. Uh, no faster than usual, anyway."

"Good," Tallheart said, reaching down to grasp Rain's shoulder. He turned his gaze toward Ameliah. "Have you told him he is an idiot?"

"Already covered," Ameliah said. Rain felt her shaking against him, but he wasn't sure if it was from tears or laughter. Finally, she released him, pushing him back to arm's length and dislodging Tallheart's hand in the process.

Rain grimaced beneath his helmet. *Tears. Definitely tears.*

Ameliah reached up to remove his helmet, pulling it away and tossing it aside. "What took you so long?"

"Sorry," Rain said quickly, feeling horrible guilt. "I got caught up in what I was doing. I was worried about... I didn't consider..." He looked at Tallheart, seeing a subtle mirror of Ameliah's concerned expression on his stony features, though it was quickly hidden. Rain winced again. "Sorry."

"Idiot," Ameliah said, pulling him close once more. Now that he was without his helmet, he was able to feel the warmth of her cheek against his. It was damp. Numbly, he wrapped his arms around her in return.

"Come," Tallheart said, gesturing toward the fire. "There is soup. Once you have eaten, you can explain what you have discovered."

"I...yes," Rain said, feeling Ameliah tighten her grip.

Belatedly, he became aware that the armor she was wearing wasn't iron any longer. He'd gotten a look at it when she'd released him before, but it hadn't registered until now.

Ameliah took a deep breath, then sighed and released him. She looked at him for a moment, then shook her head and got to her feet.

Rain clambered to stand with her, finding himself slightly unsteady, but not nearly as bad as he'd expected. His joints had none of the stiffness he'd grown used to when his soul had been damaged before, and his head, while a bit woozy, was headache-free.

He filed the observations down for later, more concerned by the carnage that he'd just noticed. While their campsite was clear, the surrounding area was littered with corpses. It was more like what he would have expected after a night's defense, not the passage of a day.

"Here," Ameliah said, and Rain tore his eyes away from the scene to see her holding out a water skin.

He took it gratefully, tilting his head back to take a deep drink. The water was warm and slightly stale, but to him, it tasted sweet. He gasped in satisfaction, lowering the skin, then using it to gesture around. "What happened?"

"Monsters happened," Tallheart said. Rain spotted him by the fire, ladling soup into a bowl.

Rain's stomach growled excitedly on seeing that, but he pushed aside the pang of hunger, looking to Ameliah for further explanation. She simply shrugged, and the motion brought his attention back to her armor.

Ameliah's armor was narrower at the waist than his, obviously, but other than that and the dull adamant finish, it appeared nearly identical in design. She didn't have the helmet on, but

Rain assumed it would have the same unornamented and practical shape as the rest of the pieces. There were no gaps between the plates, and everything was rounded to remove edges where a weapon could catch. Her gauntlets appeared like his as well, the metal joints wondrously articulated despite her smaller, more nimble hands. She'd have no trouble using a bow, even while wearing them. She was also wearing rings, one per finger and of several different metals.

Did they find some Arcane Crysts somehow, or are those just for resistances?

"Idiot," Ameliah said for the third time, shifting under his gaze. She sighed, running a hand through her disheveled hair. She looked as tired as he felt, and from the number of monster corpses lying around, she'd spent a lot of stamina. Mana, too.

Rain tilted his head.

In fact, he was *sure* her mana and stamina were low. He also felt a vague sense of... presence...from her, for lack of a better word. Tallheart too. *What the hell is going on with linksight? Am I... Am I sensing their vitals? Their power levels?*

"Stop staring," Ameliah said, crossing her arms. "I'm a mess, and I blame you."

"I think you look beautiful," Rain said honestly, looking back up at her face. *I'll worry about linksight in a minute.* "Again, I'm so sorry I made you wait."

She rolled her eyes. "Complimenting me isn't going to save you." Then, she clicked her tongue and frowned before meeting his gaze. "I was..." She stopped, then shook her head and

continued. "I was afraid you weren't coming back. People that are unconscious for that long... Even with healing... Not that you were..." She stopped again, closing her eyes and muttering something to herself.

Ameliah...

She took a deep breath, then opened her eyes and forced a smile, speaking in a much lighter tone. "Tallheart was worried too. You should have seen it."

"I was not worried," Tallheart said. Rain turned to see him holding out a bowl, now full of soup. "Come. Eat before it grows cold."

"See?" Ameliah said, wrapping her arm around Rain's back. She rested her head on his shoulder, then started guiding him toward the fire. "He's mothering."

"I am not," Tallheart said, still holding out the bowl. "Now eat."

Rain glanced down at Ameliah, then back up at Tallheart and the offered bowl. "Look, I'm really sorry I didn't—"

"Eat," Tallheart said, his expression uncompromising. "Or I will make you."

Rain heaved a contented sigh, setting down his fourth bowl. "Alright, if I eat any more, I'll explode. Can I talk now?"

"You may," Tallheart said from Rain's elbow.

Translucent green rings of energy were slowly rising around the seated cervidian. Ameliah was standing about ten meters away, keeping an eye on the tree line. She was surrounded by rings as well, but of two colors, not just one. The blue rings were rising twice as fast as the green ones, indicating a higher transfer rate. Rain had already gotten everyone's mana back to full, so now he was just offsetting the cost of Energy Well for her. Rain himself was ring-free. Ameliah didn't have IFF, so she'd needed to exclude him with simple geometry, lest he pop from overstamina.

Rain snorted, then used Purify to clean away the thin film of soup that remained in his bowl.

"I'll try to summarize. Stop me if you have any questions." He raised his voice slightly.

"Ameliah, can you hear me okay from over there?"

"I can," she said. "I have Tallheart's perception accolade. You don't need to yell."

"Great," Rain said, returning his volume to normal. "If I wander off topic, pull me back, please. I'm running with a low bar." The expression wasn't literal, simply meaning that he was tired.

"Speak," Tallheart said.

"Yes, get on with it," Ameliah called over to him.

"Right," Rain said, hiding a smile at her unintentional Monty Python reference. "So I already told you what Dozer felt before I went in, so I'll skip past that. The Bastion was fine when I got

there. All my experiments got tossed around, but nothing important was damaged. I finished the little airship I told you about before, then drove it out into the chaos, following the currents. I found my paling after...maybe an hour? It's hard to keep track of time in there. Anyway, it manifested as this enormous barrier, glowing the same shade of blue as my body in soul-space, I think. Anyway, the tear is enormous. When I got close enough to see it, the current was so strong that my airship was going to get sucked out. I had to jump back to my core unless I wanted to go with it."

"Sucked out into soul-space?" Ameliah asked.

Rain shrugged. "That's my guess. It certainly seemed dark out there."

"What would have happened if you hadn't switched?" Ameliah asked.

Rain shrugged. "I don't know, but I don't think it would have been good. When Stumps went through, I lost contact with him. I have this sort-of...sense...of where all my avatars are. Anyway, best case if I went out there, I'd find myself in soul-space, still in my avatar...or maybe in my...avatar. I need a different word for that now. Damn. Soulform? Maybe I should just start calling my self-built avatars 'puppets' or something. There're more puppet-like than any—"

Tallheart cleared his throat loudly.

"Sorry," Rain said. "So best case, I'm in soul-space. Middle of the road, I'd get dumped back into my core. Worst case, I'd die." He frowned. "No, wait. Worst case, I'd end up in soul-space with no way back, my body would die, and then my consciousness would be banished to the shadow realm for all eternity while whatever was left of my mind slowly went insane."

"Mmm," Tallheart rumbled. "A disturbing thought. A fate worse than death."

Even from this distance, Rain could tell that Ameliah had reacted even more poorly. Admonishing himself for a fool, he decided it best to continue quickly. "Right, anyway, I rebuilt Stumps and a new, improved airship, then set off again. I was really worried then that the Bastion itself might be drifting, which is why I didn't feel like I had time to come back and fill you two in. As bad as an avatar getting sucked out might be, my core would be infinitely worse. I didn't find out until later that I don't need to worry about that. As near as I can tell, my core seems to act like some sort of anchor."

"How did you determine this?" Tallheart asked.

"I'm getting to that," Rain said. "I didn't take the new airship toward the tear this time. I found my way to my paling on the opposite side of my soul and made myself a little outpost, like a barnacle. You both know what a barnacle is?"

"Yes," Ameliah said. "Though I'm a little surprised you do."

"Continue," Tallheart said before Rain could respond.

Rain smiled, snorting softly. "Anyway, I spent some time in the Barnacle, keeping track of the Bastion and making sure it wasn't drifting further away or anything. While I was there, I was able to get a really good look at my paling. It's...kinda like essence, but not. I can't shape it or anything, and it glows with its own light. It feels soft, flexible, yet somehow harder than

adamant. It's also doing more than just being a barrier, though I didn't find out about that until later.

"Eventually, once I was sure the Bastion wasn't drifting, I switched back to my core and built myself another Stumps. I figured that would be faster than pedaling my way all the way back. Then I built Kludge-3— Oh, 'Kludge' is what I decided to call my airship model. The first one looked a bit like a potato with wings, but by the time I got to the third, I'd fixed that somewhat. Not enough for a new name, though. Kludge means—"

Tallheart cleared his throat.

"Sorry," Rain said. "I'm a bit frazzled, I know. Anyway, I headed back toward the tear. I intended to set up a second Barnacle near the edge, but when I was only halfway there, the first Barnacle broke free from my paling. I have this...awareness...of my avatars, even when I'm not puppeting them. I felt Stumps-2 get shot off the wall when the Barnacle was dislodged. I switched back to him, and... I suppose you don't need every last detail. I'm gonna skip ahead a bit. That okay?"

They both nodded, so Rain continued. "I think it all comes down to pressure. Essence pressure." He paused, rubbing at the bridge of his nose, then looked up. "I'm level 24, right? So the ambient pressure inside my soul should be, well, 24. Don't ask me for a unit. We're in a rank 15 zone, and thanks to the tear, my soul has...depressurized down to level 15. But there's still wind. That's the key."

He shook his head, not waiting for them to respond. "More essence has to be coming in. I think the soul tries to maintain pressure somehow, bringing in essence from outside the

paling. It's like..." *Osmosis? No, that's the wrong word. That has to do with equalizing pressure, not maintaining it. Homeostasis, maybe? Damn it, they wouldn't understand if I tried to translate that anyway. Hell, I barely understand. Biology isn't exactly high on my list of school subjects to devote a Winter session to.*

He paused, taking a moment to collect his thoughts, raising a hand to signal his companions to wait. After a moment, he nodded, then continued. "So when I sealed off with the Barnacle, I enclosed a small section of paling. Right away, I noticed chaos getting in, but I thought that was just because my seal wasn't perfect. That's wasn't it, though. The chaos was coming *through* the paling, and it kept coming after I left. The pressure built inside until it was too much for my seal, and then the Barnacle popped free. The essence that's coming in is hot and smelly, not like the pure stuff from my core. We're in a Heat zone, with a touch of Chem, so—"

"Rain, stop," Ameliah said, raising a hand to stop him. "I'm getting a headache."

"Huh?" Rain said, looking up. "Should I drop Essence Well?"

"No, not literally," Ameliah said with a sigh. "I'm just having trouble keeping up. You're jumping around too fast."

"Mmm," Tallheart rumbled in agreement.

Rain looked between them, seeing their confounded expressions, then ran a hand down his face. *They aren't used to talking about things like pressure. Let's try this.* "You know how when you climb a mountain, the air gets all thin? The pressure difference—"

"That is not the problem," Tallheart said, raising a hand. "Not for me," he amended, glancing at Ameliah. She nodded, so he continued. "I understand pressure. I am confused by what it means regarding essence." He looked back at Rain. "Let me return to something you said days before. I wish to make sure that I understand."

"Sure," Rain said.

Tallheart nodded. "You say that you feel great pressure when you level, correct?"

"Yes," Rain replied.

"And when you do not have enough experience, the pressure is less?"

"Correct. Yes, much less. Mostly, it's just wind. It's essence exchange through the paling." Rain ran a hand through his hair. "The paling contracts in either case, but the order is different. Out then in, versus in then out. When you don't have enough experience for a level, it's like... squeezing a sponge underwater, I guess. When you do have enough experience, the paling expands first, then goes impermeable before it crunches down. The pressure builds and pushes your core to the next level."

"You are sure of this?" Tallheart asked.

Rain nodded. "Bartum—Officer Bartum; you met him, remember? Anyway, he described what it looks like, and nothing I've seen from inside contradicts that image yet. I want to run some more experiments, but yeah, I'm pretty sure. I think most of the time, the paling is just holding pressure, keeping you at some base level, no matter what the essence density outside is like.

It's only during the daily—uh, daily for most people—essence exchange that...things...happen. Changes. Like leveling and stuff. Oh, another thing. Bartum said that only awakened souls do that. Not unawakened. I don't know about animals or monsters. I was thinking about that, actually. I'm almost certain that the reason monsters get weaker in low-essence areas is that their palings are shit at maintaining pressure."

"Hmm," Tallheart said, frowning.

"You're making a lot of assumptions, Rain," Ameliah said.

Rain shook his head. "No. Well, yes, but it all fits. I have evidence. I'm...connecting lots of little bits and pieces from all over the place." He smiled. "I tell you, if I had some red string and a corkboard..."

Ameliah and Tallheart looked at him blankly.

Rain sighed. "Sorry. Look." He raised a hand. "Bartum says the souls of unawakened people are different from those of awakened." He lowered the hand, raising the opposite one. "Staavo says the great families in Xiugaaraa send their kids out to the wilds around the city when they come of age, just like the commoners, rather than taking them straight to the bottom of the great Delving." He looked at his raised hand, then let it fall with a shrug. "Hell, even before that, Jamus told me that unawakened can't survive in the depths. At the time, I assumed he was just talking about the monsters, but they really can't survive down here at all, can they?"

"Is that a rhetorical question?" Ameliah asked, raising an eyebrow. When Rain shook his head, she answered. "It depends on how far down you mean. Past the wall, unawakened can't

handle the ambient mana. Yes, mana, not essence. At least, so I've always been told. Semantics aside, I can tell you that the one time an unawakened merchant found his way to Brightside, he wouldn't stop complaining about feeling crushed. He didn't stay long." She tilted her head. "You really didn't know about this?"

Rain nodded. "I didn't. Like I said, I assumed it was just the monsters. You'd think by now, I'd have learned to stop doing that. Assuming, I mean. Oh, and Tallheart's stamina is full, by the way."

"What?" Ameliah blinked, looking at him. "Don't tell me you were counting how much I was sending him."

"No, though that is totally the kind of thing I would do." He shrugged. "I just...know. Just like I know you're at three-quarters." *Is this what Ameliah's interface feels like? It's...imprecise.* He looked at her, seeing her wearing a shocked expression. He blinked, then hurried to explain. "That's another thing. Linksight is...well. I mentioned it was stronger before I went inside, but it's more than that. It's almost as if... Almost as if..."

Hang on, what if I...? Rain tilted his head. *Party.*

Rain felt a vague sense of strain in response to the thought, like he had used to get when trying to force his interface to do something it didn't want to do. No window appeared, but the simple fact of the resistance told him that he was on the right track. Somehow, the hole in his paling was letting him tap into information that was normally available only inside a lair. It was coming in through another channel, one outside his interface, but it looked like he'd be able to integrate it anyway with a bit of effort. Effort that was probably unwise at the moment.

"Almost as if what?" Ameliah asked.

"Huh?" Rain asked, looking at her, having become lost in his own thoughts.

Tallheart grunted, and they both looked at him. "He was correct about my stamina," he said.

"You may stop."

Looking almost as numb as Rain felt, Ameliah took a large step back, and the green rings around Tallheart vanished. At the same time, the ones surrounding her doubled in speed, matching pace with Essence Well. "You can really sense..."

Rain nodded. "I can. I don't think the resolution is that great, but... Anyway, I think it's all related. The system is... How can I explain this?" He gestured vaguely. "It's like... It's like there are layers to it. There's essence, right? But then, there's experience, and they're not the same. I think essence is the base layer, as in, how the world really works, and experience is something built on top of that. An approximation, or maybe...a currency or something." *Damn it, I need to start a new document. I've got notes on all of this, but it's a total mess.* Rain raised his hands, but stopped himself just short of summoning a keyboard. For one thing, he was in the middle of a conversation, and for another, he'd noticed the time. It was almost true dusk.

"What is it?" Tallheart asked, stiffening in response to Rain's body language.

"The time," Rain said, getting to his feet, then looking around for his helmet. He gestured around the campsite at all the monster corpses, knowing that they'd catch his meaning. It was evident that the gigantic essence blowout from his soul had attracted them in some way.

Ameliah and Tallheart had come to that conclusion even without him, telling him so while he'd been having his soup. They hadn't lingered on the topic, more focused on convincing him that the damage to his soul hadn't been his fault. He was grateful to them for that, but his feelings didn't matter, not in the face of what he suspected was about to happen.

The only question was how bad it would be and how long it would take for the spawns to stop. If they needed to, they could retreat to the island at the center of the lake, though that wasn't without its own dangers. They could even return to the fortress they'd left back in the trees. Unfortunately, they wouldn't have much time to discuss it further. The Fire Moss was already beginning to fade, the pulses of light coming slower and slower by the moment.

A Deepcat yowled in the distance, answered by another, and then another. Rain's clock ticked over, and the last of the moss-light vanished, leaving them with only their fire, the dim glow of the lava lake, and the green rings rising around Ameliah. Those provided no illumination, but Rain could still see her clearly enough to make out the look she was giving him.

"Have I told you that you're a trouble magnet?" she asked.

"Once or twice," Rain said, slipping on his helmet.

More howls joined in, the night coming alive with the sounds of waking monsters. Not just Deepcats. Dozens of cries became what seemed to be hundreds, accompanied by the snapping of twigs and the rustle of disturbed leaves in the distance. It sounded as if the entire Ashen Jungle was coming for them, the monsters no longer held back by their daytime skittishness.

Tallheart got to his feet smoothly, rolling his neck and reaching for his hammer. "At least we will not lack for Tel." He rumbled, low in his chest, seemingly amused, though it was difficult to tell over the cacophony. "A magnet indeed."