

117: Trust

As Rain stared at the swirling barrier of the lair in front of them, a sudden realization blasted through the sleep-addled panic bouncing around his head. He latched onto it, quickly fixating on the problem as his thoughts cleared.

This is trouble.

Turning, he shouted. "Vanna!"

He jumped down from the forgewagon, barely even noting the cold as his bare feet plunged into the snow. He activated Detection, which was what he should have done the instant he'd realized his accolade was missing, instead of checking his pockets like a moron. The full-powered pulse came back with only the signals from the two accolades still safe beneath his forceweave.

Damn. Either I bonded it in my sleep somehow, I dropped it in the snow, or someone yinked it.

Resisting the urge to pull open his menus and scour them for any hint of the accolade's presence, Rain hurried to meet Vanna, who was headed in his direction. The accolade wasn't important right now. Rather, it was, but the lair had greater potential for being an issue if he didn't get on top of things quickly.

I can't look weak here. The credit system isn't ready, which means there's going to be a massive kerfuffle about who gets to go, maybe a disastrous one. I'm the damn leader, though, so if I can get them to just...

He shook his head. "Vanna!" he said, stopping as he met her. "There's a lair where Essed was supposed to be. I need you to get everyone grouped up right here," he pointed at his feet. "Tell them that Ameliah and I are going to take a look so we know what we're dealing with. Try and put a squash on speculation until we're back. Get people to set up a perimeter or something. Keep them busy."

Through Rain's rapid speech, Vanna's face had flowed through surprise, to understanding, and then to concern. "I...yes," she said, glancing over her shoulder at the oncoming sleds.

"Vanna, remember, you're second in command," Rain said in a breathless rush. "I don't think there'll be a problem immediately, but we need to set some precedent that you and I are in charge, and that what we say goes in situations like this. If anyone gives you shit, ignore it, give them a simple job, and then move right on to ordering someone else before they can talk back. Don't give anyone time to question your commands."

Rain put his advice into practice, spinning away and heading for the forgewagon. He'd located his armor, Detection informing him that it was in the vehicle's bed.

"I'm going to go see what level it is," Ameliah called, waving to catch Rain's attention. She had remained near the forgewagon with Mlem, who was stroking his mustache, a thoughtful expression on his face as he stared in the direction of the lair.

"Good," Rain said, not looking up. "I'll join you as soon as I get this on." He started hauling bits of armor out of the forgewagon's bed, tossing them on the ground as he hunted for the breastplate. Finding it, he had to lift it and shake it violently to dislodge Dozer, who was sleeping inside of it like some kind of gelatinous turtle.

"You seem to be in an awful rush," said Mlem, walking around the forgewagon to stand behind him. "You are not concerned that a monster will exit the lair, are you? That never happens. Well, almost never. I will grant you that spawns are more likely nearby."

"No, that's not it," Rain said. He looked up. "I'm worried about what's going to happen when people realize we've got no clear way of picking who gets to go."

"Ah," Mlem said, laughing. "A good point. This is going to be a marvelous disaster." He looked back at the lair, the twinkle of avarice in his gaze clear to Rain's eyes.

Rain grimaced, hopping on one foot as he struggled with a sabaton.

Mlem snorted and shifted his gaze back to Rain. "Here, at least let me help you before you hurt yourself. I understand acting quickly to seize an opportunity, but this is ridiculous. No one is just going to run into it or something."

"Oi! Dibs!" Kettel's voice came from over Rain's shoulder. He turned to see the teenage idiot sprinting toward the barrier at full speed.

Rain glanced at Mlem. "You were saying?"

An hour later, things had calmed down somewhat. The sleds had been gathered in a farmer's field that they'd found on the forest's edge near the boundary to the lair. There hadn't been a farmhouse, at least that they'd been able to locate. Company members were hard at work collecting firewood and setting up for dinner while Ameliah scouted around and Tallheart tinkered with the forgewagon.

There was a lot of excited speculation floating around about the lair, but the threat of imminent nightfall had gotten people off his back about it for the moment. They knew just as much as he did, based on Ameliah's initial report. The lair was rank nine, cold aspect, and right where Essed was supposed to be.

"Rain, a word?" Ameliah said, tapping him on the shoulder.

Rain jumped slightly. He hadn't heard her approaching, or even realized that she was back. He turned quickly, nodding. "Yeah, we should talk."

Ameliah nodded. "Not here," she said, beckoning as she headed for the trees. Rain followed cautiously, aware that monsters were still lurking under the cover of the branches, though presumably nothing strong enough to challenge Ameliah. The depth gauge showed this area as around rank eleven, the same as Fel Sadanis. Still, all it would take for a surprise Razorspine would be a large patch of shadow and Murphy's Law.

Carten looked up as they passed, but didn't comment on them leaving the camp. He and the other awakened were on defense duty, and Tallheart was there, so Rain wasn't too worried about there being an issue.

He and Ameliah walked silently for a few minutes until she stopped beside a large knotted tree. She turned to face him, a serious expression on her face. "The lair being on the surface is a problem," she said without preamble.

"Um," Rain said. "Why? It's not that common, is it?"

Ameliah shook her head. "No, it isn't common, and that's because when lairs are on the surface, people *find* them."

"Oh," Rain said, thinking. *She's got a good point. Officer Sells said his job before all this was to scan the badlands for lairs with Scrying Pool, not that he could have done that from Fel Sadanis with his crappy range. Probably they have an outpost down there or something. Anyway, now that this entire area is ranked, they're probably going to bring in more Diviners to help him monitor the area around the city.* Rain shifted nervously, feeling eyes on his neck. It was entirely possible that the Watch was observing them even now. He shook his head, shoving the paranoia aside. "The Watch shouldn't give us any trouble, even if they're, well, watching. Guild rules would let us claim the lair, as we're the first—"

"The Watch isn't who I'm worried about," Ameliah interrupted, shaking her head. "I'm worried because they didn't already see it. If they knew about it, we'd never have gotten here first. The Watch's Diviner—what was his name? He *did* check Essed, right?"

Rain shrugged. "Yeah. His name's Sells, and I saw Essed myself in his pool. It was just broken houses and snow."

Ameliah gestured vaguely. "How likely does it seem that a lair just spawned between then and now?"

"I see your point," Rain said. "It does seem pretty unlikely. What other explanation is there, though? You're *sure* that the lair is where the village is supposed to be? Maybe Sells was looking in the wrong place? Some other village?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Ameliah said, pointing. "There are a few houses around the far side, and half of a collapsed inn right on the boundary. Plus, the name of the lair is 'Essed Frostbarrows'."

"Huh," Rain said. "The name might just have been picked up from your expectations. I'm still not sure how that works. Anyway, unlikely isn't impossible. I guess it could have spawned in the past few days..." He shook his head. "What makes lairs appear in the first place? Is it just random? I mean, it being right on top of the village we were headed to? Now *that* seems unlikely."

"There's a rumor that lairs spawn where there've been lots of deaths, but I'm not sure it's true; otherwise, you'd hear about people...trying to make lairs spawn that way. Anyway, yes, it might have been chance that it spawned just before we got here, and it might have been that all the deaths from the shift attracted it to this spot, but let me bring your attention to a more disturbing possibility. What if this lair has been here for longer than a day or two? What if Lightbreaker is still out here, and the reason the Watch didn't see it is because of that skill of his?"

Rain froze. "Shit."

"Yes," Ameliah said, nodding.

"Hang on, let me work through this," Rain said, holding up a hand. He started to pace, speaking through his thoughts. "We know the army was using Obfuscate to block magical

tracking—other than Scrying Pool, because that's optical and wouldn't be affected.

Lightbreaker can deal with that, though, which is how they got past the DKE and the Watch..."

Rain scratched at his beard, turning and pacing back the other way. "Assuming that the Empire did hide this lair, they aren't still here, or we'd be dead by now. Plus, we can see it, so there's that. I've got no idea how Lightbreaker's skill works, but unless he only hid it from above, we can probably say the spell's not still active. I should talk to..." Rain stopped, glancing up at Ameliah. She probably didn't know that Val was Lightbreaker's son, and he'd promised to keep that quiet.

"Anyway, why would they bother?" he continued, remaining by the tree and addressing Ameliah directly. "If they're still here, which I doubt, they'd be monitoring Fel Sadanis and waiting for the barrier to drop. Why would they hide the lair? I would think they'd either have ignored it or just broken the core and moved on."

"They could be farming it," Ameliah said. "They might be hiding nearby and waiting for it to spawn a blue. From what I know of the Adamants, they'll have some unawakened with them. Or they could have hidden the lair as a trap or something."

"Was it at full when you checked it?" Rain asked.

"Yes, but that doesn't prove anything. Lairs spawn fully charged, I think, but we don't know how fast this one recovers. If Lightbreaker hid it, that matters, plus how long ago he was here."

"It takes weeks at least for a lair to get back to full, right?"

Ameliah shrugged. "It depends."

Rain shook his head. "This seems awfully convoluted. If this is a trap, who's it for? Not a Citizen, certainly. They wouldn't care about a low-rank lair way out here, not now that they've lost the city. I just don't see the motivation for the Empire to still be here. Occam's Razor is a logical principle where I come from. It says that the simplest explanation is most likely correct. The simplest explanation is that this simply wasn't here when Sells looked, or that he was looking at the wrong spot. Lightbreaker's army is probably over the mountains by now, playing hit and run inside DKE territory. That's what I'd be doing if I was the commander of an evil invisible army."

"I still don't like it," Ameliah said, rubbing at her neck. Some of the tension had drained from her face, but not all of it.

"Is there anything we can do to check?" Rain asked. "Do you have Scrying Pool? Can you, I don't know, just look down at this area and see if there's an illusion up there?"

"I don't have it right now, but I could get it..." Ameliah said. "It's not a bad idea, but it would take me a while to shuffle all the prerequisites around. It might be faster to just fly up and look."

Rain froze, staring at her. "You never said you could fly."

Ameliah shrugged. "I never said I couldn't, either. I could take Flight with less shuffling than Scrying Pool. It would be slow without a bunch of Arcane metamagic, plus I don't have it leveled very high, but that won't matter for this. Speed is only important if you want to use it in combat. I've never seen the point of Flight unless you're fighting other people. I prefer to fight monsters, and those are usually underground, not up in the clouds."

Rain stared at her. "How can you be so unenthusiastic about flying? Don't you find it fun?"

Ameliah snorted. "I find it windy. Sure, it's fun, but it's not very practical."

"You are so wrong, I don't even know where to begin," Rain said, raising his hands over his head in exaggerated disbelief. "I'd kill to be able to fly. So what if it's not practical underground? It's awesome!"

Ameliah laughed. "Fine, I'll take you flying sometime after I make sure we're not all about to die."

Rain's stomach did an odd, sort-of backflip. "Really?"

"Sure, why not? I'll just need to make sure not to drop you, though with Force Ward and that armor, you'd probably be fine unless you land on your head."

"If you're trying to scare me out of it, it won't work," Rain said, smiling.

Ameliah shook her head. "Maybe tomorrow after we've dealt with the lair. I need to set up the walls tonight, then swap out some skills and check for the illusion. After that, I'm going to sleep. Not all of us got a free ride for the whole afternoon."

"Hey, I was meditating. It's not my fault nobody told me we were leaving."

"You were snoring by the time we broke camp. If that's meditation, it's a technique I've never heard of," Ameliah said.

"I don't snore," Rain protested.

"You do," Ameliah said. "Like a little kitten."

"Hey!"

Ameliah laughed. "Tallheart thought you were sick, so he came to get me when you started. He didn't know what it meant. Cervidians don't snore, apparently."

"And neither of you just woke me up?"

"You needed the sleep," Ameliah said, giving him a look.

Rain sighed. She was right, and he knew it. "Well, whatever I was doing, it worked." He held up a hand and concentrated. After a moment, a metal plate dropped into his hand.

Accolade of the Hoarfrost Labyrinth
+20 Heat Resistance

"Here," he said, offering it to her. "Check it out."

Ameliah blinked. She reached out to take the plate but stopped before her fingers even got close. "This is one of the ones you told me about? You finally managed to bind them?"

"Just this one. Go on, take it," Rain said. "I trust you."

Ameliah shook her head, then took the plate. The moment her fingers touched it, Rain gasped, his linksight flaring in a horrible tearing sensation.

"Shit," he swore, laying a hand on the knotted tree to stabilize himself. "Give it back, quick!"

Ameliah held out the plate, and Rain snatched it from her fingers. The sensation was different this time, more like a normal linksight flash, though not quite. Rain slumped to the ground, propping his back against the tree as he stared at the plate in relief. The text was still there, as was the boost when he checked his interface.

"What happened?" Ameliah asked, crouching down.

"I felt the connection break," Rain said, still staring at the plate. "It felt horrible, and I was worried that—" He froze mid-sentence. He'd looked up and seen Ameliah's face mere centimeters from his own. *She is...very close.*

Ameliah peered into his eyes, then nodded and stood, offering him her hand. Rain felt his cheeks heat as he took it and let her pull him back to his feet.

"Uh," he said, rubbing at his neck as he looked away awkwardly. "I'm sorry I kinda snatched it back."

"Don't worry about it," Ameliah said.

Rain closed his eyes, took a calming breath, then opened them and held out the plate once more. "Here, try again. For science."

"Didn't you just say that it felt horrible?" Ameliah asked, not moving to accept it.

"Yes," Rain said, nodding. "A normal person wouldn't want to do that again, but a scientist would wonder if it happens every time." *I should draw out some xkcds. There are some good ones that people here would get, and I can manage stick figures.* He pushed the plate toward her. "Please."

"You're sure this is a good idea?" she asked.

Rain nodded. "I'm sure. I won't blame you if the link actually does break for good. I managed to bond the thing once, so that means I can do it again. I just need to figure out what I did while I was asleep." *...and repeat it with the other two.* "Besides, it's not like the buff is useful right now. It still wouldn't let me use Immolate at full blast without cooking everyone nearby."

Ameliah slowly took the plate, watching his face. Rain thought he hid his grimace well as the tearing sensation repeated itself, but apparently not well enough. Ameliah narrowed her eyes and stared at him. "The same?"

He nodded, checking his interface. "Yeah."

"Hmm," Ameliah said, holding up the plate. It vanished, then appeared again as she re-summoned it. "This is a really strange accolade. The metal is blue, so it came from a cold lair, but it gives heat resistance. It makes a certain sort of sense, but usually, it's the other way around." She summoned and dismissed it a few more times. "Whatever's wrong, it's with you, not with the accolade." The plate vanished from her left hand, then appeared in her right. She offered it back to him. "It's behaving normally as far as I can tell."

Rain took it, and the bond reformed as before. He nodded, then vanished the plate and summoned another one.

Accolade of the Everdeep Fortress
+10 Perception

"Here, now this," he held it out to her. He didn't bother to hide his reaction this time as she took it. "Gah, same thing again," he said, blinking owlishly as the sensation faded. Everything seemed just a bit dimmer.

"Hmm," Ameliah said. A second plate appeared in her other hand, identical to the one Rain had just given her. She seemed to consider something for a moment before offering it to him. "Here, see if you can use my copy."

Rain took it, concentrating on his linksight. Nothing happened. There was no pain, no flash of connection, nothing. His senses still felt dull, so he shook his head. "Nope, not working." He peered at the plate. The buff was listed, unlike the unbound accolade, yet he couldn't access it.

"Odd," Ameliah said. "I'm still getting the bonus from both, even though you're holding mine." She stared at the accolade in her hand, then looked at him with a strange expression on her face. "This feels weird, you know. People don't do this."

"Do what?" Rain asked. *She looks...self-conscious? No, it's more complicated than that.*

"Trade accolades like this, at least, not so casually," Ameliah said, her expression fading.

"There's a process. Otherwise, what do you do if someone doesn't give your accolade back? The only way to force the matter would be to kill them." She gestured with his plate. "You're showing me a ridiculous level of trust right now. I could just keep this, and there wouldn't be a thing you could do about it."

Rain shook his head. "You wouldn't do something like that." He grinned. "Besides, I've got yours, so you're trusting me just as much."

"Am I, though?" she asked.

Rain jumped as the plate vanished from his fingers.

Ameliah nodded. "Yeah, that's not supposed to be possible either. Something is definitely wrong with you. The only way to unbind an accolade I know of is to die. Transferring the bond is different, and it should have happened the moment the plate passed into your domain. But it didn't."

"Right," Rain said, thinking. "Wait a minute. The buff still worked for you when I was holding it?"

Ameliah nodded.

"Is there a distance limit on that?"

She shook her head, toying with Rain's accolade between her fingers. "No. Accolades aren't like spells. They don't care about distance. Some nobles give them to their kids, but make them leave them in a vault or something. If they get themselves killed, the family doesn't lose their inheritance." She flipped the plate around one last time, then offered it back to him.

"Ah, that's...pragmatic," Rain said, taking it and feeling the link reform and his senses sharpen. "What's the limit on how many accolades someone can have, by the way?" *I wonder how many she has.*

"Don't you already know that?" Ameliah asked, raising an eyebrow. "How haven't you already asked someone?"

"I have," Rain said, "I just want confirmation."

Ameliah's face held the glimmer of a wry smile as she answered. "You can hold as many as you want, but you only have slots for a few to be active. Stronger accolades can take up more than one slot, and the number of slots you have is one per level, plus one. Of course, there are hundreds of rumors for ways to get more, but none of those are real. Also, it takes a while to get used to using all your slots, just like it does for stat boosts."

Rain nodded along as she spoke. *I should be able to convince the system to give me a screen for this...* He looked back up, another question springing to his lips. "So, that extra slot, does that mean an unawakened can use an accolade?"

"Yes," Ameliah said. "At least, that's what I've heard."

"Cool," Rain said. "I'm thinking that once we've built up a bunch of accolades in the company, we can share them as needed. For example, take this cold lair. If we had people with cold resistance accolades, they could lend them to the delve team. Really stack them up. Optimize."

Ameliah snorted. "You're crazy."

Rain smiled. "As I've said before, all this paranoia and selfishness isn't productive."

"You really..." she trailed off, then sighed deeply. "You're too trusting, Rain. You haven't been burned, not like I have. I once lent someone I *thought* I knew an accolade, just like you're suggesting."

Rain's smile froze at her tone. *Uh oh.*

"He still has it," Ameliah said, a bitter note twisting her voice. "He knew I wouldn't kill him to get it back, so he just kept it. And it was a rare one, too, even among accolades. It granted a skill."

"Damn," Rain said. "I'm sorry..."

Ameliah shook her head. "We should get back to the camp. I've got dirt to move and skills to swap, and you've got to figure out how to keep everyone from murdering each other over the lair. Good luck with that, by the way. I think I've got the easy job." She turned, heading toward the fires the others had started while they'd been talking.

"Uh, right," Rain said, following. "Speaking of that, do you think we'd be able to handle the lair without you? I don't want to rely on you and Tallheart so much if we don't have to."

"Mmm," Ameliah said. "I'll decide once I see what your so-called delve team looks like. Now come on, the sun is setting, and you've used up your questions for the day."

They walked in silence for a few minutes, Rain struggling to keep up as Ameliah wove gracefully through the trees, stepping effortlessly over hidden roots that kept tripping him up in his haste. As they neared the camp, Carten's voice boomed through the twilight. "Oi! There's somethin'—oh."

Rain stumbled out of the trees a moment after Ameliah, spotting Carten waiting for them.

The bearded man relaxed as he recognized them. "It's jus' you two," he said, lowering his shields, his face splitting into a grin. "Done kissin'?"

Ameliah sighed and glanced at Rain. "Do you want to hit him, or should I?"