

236: Highway

Nim sat clutching her empty cup in the gatehouse, listening with rapt attention. The rest of her party was with her, consisting of Remezzo, Bryz, and Letraue, huddled around the tiny table. The four of them were fresh from their awakenings, having all turned fifteen within the past three months and shared the same blue. The monster had been brought to them caged, of course, so it had been nice and safe. Once her stupid older brother showed up, they'd be entering the *dark*, where it was most assuredly *not*. She'd have been nervous had she not been entirely distracted at the moment.

"Okay," Dearest said, gesturing with a spoon. "There's a famous thought test that helps explain, though 'test' isn't the right word. What do you call a thing you do to find an answer you don't know?"

"An experiment?" Bryz asked.

"Who are you asking?" Letraue said, giving her a look and pointing rudely at Dearest. "Him?"

"The word in common is <something>, if that helps," Honey supplied.

"It doesn't," Letraue said, crossing his arms. "Nim's brother is the only one who speaks that barbarian bark bark. Speaking of your brother, Nim, why is he a slug?"

"He was born that way," Nim replied by reflex.

Dearest laughed, smiling at her and sending a shiver down her spine. Hurriedly, she pretended to take a sip from her empty cup.

Honey and Dearest had barely been able to express themselves when they'd arrived at the gatehouse and said they'd been hired to escort them, sounding like they'd learned Zeelada from a book or something. Now, the way they spoke was practically poetic—even when they didn't know all the words and had to ask for them. Their speech held no misplaced pauses, filler words, or asymmetry in its structure. It was—in a word—flawless. Every reply sounded like it had been practiced dozens of times in front of a mirror. She'd heard what high mental stats could do, but she'd never expected to see *anyone* master Zeelada in front of her eyes. Not in the space of an hour.

"So in this thought experiment," Dearest continued, "there's an inn run by a man named Hilbert. Not a normal inn, but an infinite inn with an infinite number of rooms. Do you need a minute to picture that, or have you got it?"

"Let's just say we've got it," Letraue said, rubbing his forehead.

"Great," Dearest said happily, clearly unbothered by his distress. "Picture a really busy night. The inn's full-up. Every one of the infinite rooms is already assigned to a guest."

"Infinite...guests..." Bryz said, clearly struggling.

Nim's heart went out to her friend. Personally, she'd stopped trying to follow anything more than the words. The words were beautiful, even if the concept Dearest was describing was far beyond her. They were almost as beautiful as the mercenary himself, with his shockingly blue eyes and his rugged, rough-trimmed beard.

As if against her will, her eyes were drawn to Honey's hand resting atop his.

I want that.

Dearest, though he'd been looking the other way and shouldn't have noticed, immediately looked down at his hand. Before she could react, he was looking straight at her.

"Eep!" Nim squeaked, blushing a furious pink and scrambling for her cup. This time, there was no hiding the fact that it was empty.

Honey laughed, then slid her the wine jug. Catching Nim's eye, she returned her hand to Dearest's and mouthed the word 'mine' before squeezing it with a wink.

Nim did her best to sink through her chair. Remezzo laughed and patted her on the shoulder, while Letraue merely rolled his eyes. Bryz didn't even seem to have noticed, too deep in contemplation.

Dearest gave her a polite, disinterested smile that made her want to die, then cleared his throat. "So, as I was saying, every room in the infinite inn is full. But then, a woman walks in and asks for a place to stay. What does Hilbert say?"

Letraue grunted. "He says the inn's full, obviously."

Dearest whirled on him with the spoon. "Wrong! The innkeeper is a smart cookie, you see? He knows all the rooms are full, but he also knows there are an infinite number of them. He says, okay, you there in room one, I want you to move to room two. You in room two, move to room three. So on and so forth forever." Finished using the spoon as a pointer, he rolled it across his armored knuckles in a casual display of dexterity. "Room one's free now, so the new

guest takes it. You might think there's a problem with two people ending up in the last room, but that's the thing! There is no last room!"

"Settle down, Dearest," Honey said. "You're going to break them."

"What if one of the guests doesn't want to move?" Remezzo asked, unexpectedly entering the conversation.

"That's not the point!" Dearest said, slashing the spoon through the air like it was a sword.

"You need to think of the guests like spherical cows in a place without air!"

Nym blinked. She had never heard such grammatically perfect nonsense before.

Letraue groaned, letting his head hit the table. "He's not a merc; he's a fucking bard having a joke."

"A *spoony* bard, and I assure you that this is quite serious," Dearest said, tapping his spoon on the table.

That one had even Honey looking at him askance.

"Nobody appreciates me," Dearest said with a sigh, dropping the cutlery and waving his hand.

"Anyway, the point is, there's room for more guests. Even if an infinite carriage pulls up with an infinite number of people in it, Hilbert just asks every existing guest to go to the room with twice their room number. That makes all the odd rooms free, and there are an infinite number of odd numbers, so—"

"Sorry I'm late."

Genn's voice was so abrupt that Nim released a startled yelp.

"Damn," Dearest muttered to himself. "Didn't get a chance to explain countable versus uncountable."

"Genn, thank Dysteas," Letraue said, shoving himself back from the table. "If he doesn't stop talking once we're out there, I'm done. I'll wait for another silver if it takes a month."

"Sorry about him," Honey said, punching Dearest in the shoulder and getting to her feet. "He really likes math."

"He better be as good at fighting as he is at giving me a headache," Letraue said with a huff.

Genn glared at him. "My father wouldn't have hired him—they—if they weren't. He vetted their combat abilities personally, so unless you're suddenly willing to pay Guild rates, you are the one who needs to stop talking. It is our luck that they're willing to ferry my useless crafter sister and her useless crafter friends to their useless crafter mentor."

"Crafters aren't useless," Honey said as she scooped up the miniature Crystal Slime slumbering in the center of the table. "Where do you think we got our armor?"

"Useless in a fight," Genn clarified, turning to her with a bow. "Greetings of the light."

"May it shine eternal," Honey replied easily, though she seemed less than impressed.

Grunting, Genn dug out a pair of heavy bluestone passes, then tossed them on the table. "Here, your passes. Now, can you understand me well enough, or <something something something something>?"

"Zeelada is fine," Dearest said, picking up the passes and trading one of them with Honey, receiving the slime in exchange. He set the gelatinous creature on his shoulder, then tilted his head toward the Entente checkpoint. "Shall we? I'd like to reach Threecore by morning."

"M-morning!" Nim stammered, stumbling as she was partway to her feet. "We're not stopping at the waystation?"

"They're silver, sis," Genn said. He turned to address the mercenaries. "Do me a favor and let them fight something toothy on the way." He planted his hands on his hips. "What do I call you, anyway? Father didn't give me your names."

Dearest chuckled. "We never reveal our true names. Part of our mercenary mystique." He grinned. "You can call me Mouse."

"Tiger," Honey said.

Nim blinked. "But...I thought...Honey and Dearest..."

The two mercenaries looked at each other, then exploded with laughter.

Rain rolled his shoulders in relief as the heavy door banged shut behind them, sealing them in what was essentially an airlock. The city was quite serious when it came to keeping the depths sealed off, and for good reason. The pass system was dumb, though—unavoidable without revealing their Guild affiliation, but dumb. He didn't know what they'd have done if they'd been forced to wait their turn in the lottery.

[Hold this, will you?] he said to Dozer, poking the slime on his shoulder with the corner of the card-shaped pass.

[Helping!] Dozer said, happily sucking up the object.

"Everyone get ready," Genn said, raising a hand and summoning a Lunar Orb. "We don't know what's out there."

"I do, actually," Rain said, moving to the outer door, though he didn't have far to move in the cramped space. It was deepstone and just *stupid* heavy, but he had no trouble forcing it open, even against the powerful springs he discovered holding it closed. Beyond, a dim passage stretched into the distance, not entirely dark thanks to glowing golden flecks sprinkled across the ceiling, walls, and floor.

Light-aspect. What a shock.

"Hey," Letraue said angrily from behind him. "Genn said to wait."

"Relax, I've got a Divination skill," Rain replied, breathing in the heady not-scent of essence. Already, he could tell the concentration was higher out in the passage. Confirming that his

ramscoop efficiency was already rising, he moved through the door, then turned to brace it open. "Come on. It's perfectly safe."

Nim, the closest, made to step forward, but Genn caught her, roughly shouldering past. "Stay behind me, little sis," he said to her, moving past Rain and drawing his sword against the darkness. "Sorry, Dearest, I know this is nothing to you, but I don't trust skills I don't know."

"Wise," Rain said with a nod.

"Stop calling him that," Nim whined, trailing after her brother.

Slowly, the others filed out as well, well-hidden terror radiating as they stared owlishly down the tunnel. It seemed probable that none of them had ever experienced darkness. Genn was the least affected. By his uneasy soul, he was around level fifteen and not quite so soft as the rest of the city's populace. Rain knew from speaking with his father that he freelanced as a scout in the surrounding jungle, but that would only be during the day.

Ameliah was last out, and Rain carefully eased the door closed after her, not letting it slam. As it settled into its frame with a quiet whump, the four fledglings nevertheless jumped, huddling beneath Genn's light. They wanted to be Illuminators and thus would be taking skills to unlock Rune Worker, though it didn't feel like any of them had passed level three. Genn was probably right that they'd be useless in a fight. Anyone in Ascension could have wiped the floor with them, including the unawakened.

Training them is not why I'm here. Whatever they get out of this is up to them.

Shaking his head, Rain dusted his hands. "Okay. I'll take point. Genn will follow, then the rest of you. Tiger will take up the rear. Rest assured that she and I will be able to deal with anything we're likely to run into, so don't break formation or try to help us. Genn, you should stay close to the others in case something gets through, which it won't, but always have a backup." Reaching the front, he turned. "Now, at this depth, this late in the day, I doubt we'll be seeing anything with more legs than two until dusk, but even people could prove dangerous. The last thing we want is to sneak up on someone twitchy enough to lob a Fireball at our faces before they realize who we are. To that end, we'll be making a bunch of noise. Any questions before I start singing?"

"Mouse, no," Ameliah said.

He just grinned at her.

"How about you tell us what you can do?" Letraue said, crossing his arms. He made no move to take his spot. "Isn't that standard delver procedure?"

Genn sighed. "Did you not hear me say they were silver?"

"My first ability is walking and talking at the same time," Rain said, turning to stride off down the tunnel. He allowed himself to feel some measure of satisfaction from the outraged spluttering this generated. It wasn't often that he got to play the snarky asshole.

"My second ability is the Divination skill I mentioned," he said, raising a finger before anyone got more upset. "It will let me know if any monsters or people are approaching. It will also let me find any of you if you become separated from the group, which you will if you do not *keep up*." He'd reached the boundary of the light from Lunar Orb but kept going, the golden flecks

more than enough to guide him with his enhanced perception. Behind him, he was aware of the others scrambling to follow in various states of panic. The emissions from Ameliah just felt amused.

“Third!” he boomed, raising his volume to compensate for the growing distance. “As Genn has reminded the rest of you twice now, Tiger and I are silver, which means nothing at this depth will trouble us. In the unlikely event that I do detect a monster, I will dash ahead and deal with it before it even has a chance to smell you. Taking the left fork!”

Veering down the left tunnel as indicated, Rain stopped speaking for a moment, tracking the others as they followed. He slowed his pace, allowing them to catch up until the light of Lunar Orb again washed over him. Confident that they were now out of Eavesdrop range from the guardhouse and no longer able to feel Burrik’s colossal soul through the rocky ceiling, he moved on to more sensitive details. “Fourth! We are both, in effect, utility Mages. I know we don’t look like it, but check your status, please. Specifically your resistances.”

“Six in five!” Letraue exclaimed, the first to get there.

“Yes,” Rain said, nodding. “I am covering you with one-hundred and twenty percent resistance to Force, Arcane, Chemical, Mental, and Heat damage—and have been since we left the guardhouse. I can block the other elements too, but the skills to do that take mana when they’re active. The ones I’m using now take mana when you take damage, and they WILL turn off if I run out, so don’t go lighting yourselves on fire to see whether it tickles.”

“We’re...immune to damage?” Nim asked, slightly out of breath despite the fact that they were only moving at a brisk walk. “From Heat and the rest, I mean? As long as you have mana?”

"Not immune," Ameliah said from the back. "Don't forget piercing skills. There aren't supposed to be any monsters in this zone with them, but it pays to be cautious."

"How much mana do you have?" Genn asked.

"At the moment?" Rain glanced at his HUD, though he didn't need to. "About a quarter million."

Someone stumbled, probably Bryz, as she was the one that spoke next. "So much!"

Genn sighed. "Siiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiveeeerrrr. I swear. Nim, find smarter friends."

"You're the one who can't figure out why no one likes you," Bryz fired back.

"Let's pick up the pace," Rain said, managing not to laugh while increasing his speed to a jog. Even with the constraining fabric binding up his joints, it felt good to run. The tunnel was sloping sharply downward now, but it flattened out again ahead. As he understood it, the coming section of the delving had been constructed to give a nice, wide spawning zone for hunting purposes. He could feel tunnels splitting off on either side ahead of them, spreading in a honeycomb-like structure.

"We're not going to be jogging the whole way, are we?" Nim asked.

"Of course not," Rain replied. "We'd never make it in time. Tiger, please activate the imperial performance-enhancers."

"Is that what we're calling them?" Ameliah asked. "And are you sure? We can always stop for the night."

"You need the practice, and so do they," Rain said. Pressing with his soul, he sent some additional subtext. *We don't have time to take it easy.*

"Okay," Ameliah said, seeming to understand. She clapped her hands. "Everyone, I'm about to boost all your stats. Before I do, is anyone using any stat-boosting equipment? I don't want to exceed anyone's tolerance."

"I have a plus-ten Strength stat ring," Genn said.

"You'll be fine," Rain replied. "Havenheild?"

"Yeah," Genn confirmed.

"Maybe not fine, actually," Rain said, scratching his beard. "I almost lost a finger to one of those once."

"I can also heal," Ameliah said. "Just putting that out there."

"Wait, what?" Nim asked, glancing at her brother with concern.

Ameliah didn't give Rain time to respond. "Stat boost in three...two...one."

On 'one', Rain flicked his eyes up, watching a shimmering distortion appear. Empire of Will created a blue flame that hung above the brow of anyone affected, while Empire of Grit and

Empire of Brawn did the same in green and red. Ameliah had long since internalized his objectively correct color associations for the stats, even before they became Ascension-standard. As for Empire of Drive, it was a little different from the other Imperial Auras, both in effect and in visual manifestation. Mechanically, it boosted the associated secondary stat for any of the others that were active. Visually, it manifested as a golden crown, into which the fires of the other skills set themselves like gemstones.

Ameliah was using them all at once through Prismatic Intent. She'd been forced to take it so she could level Empire of Drive, which couldn't be used alone. The amount of prerequisite juggling she'd had to do to unlock it had set her back by half a day. Then, she'd gone and leveled it to rank four with barely an issue, making Rain feel like a total scrub. She'd had his example to follow, but still.

"Everyone okay?" Ameliah asked.

Rain checked his status as the others answered in the affirmative, seeing that she'd added a single point to all of his stats. She would have had to set Channel Mastery a good deal higher on Empire of Drive than on the others to do that, given that she was still leveling it. Unity was tantalizingly close but as yet out of reach.

"I'm going to increase it now," Ameliah said. "Let me know if it gets uncomfortable."

Rain smiled, watching the numbers increase. Increasing numbers were his favorite thing. Unfortunately, it stopped as soon as it started.

"Ah!" Nim cried, hissing through her teeth.

"Backing off to plus four," Ameliah said. "I'll try plus five again later, once you've had time to get used to it."

[Crown!] Dozer sent excitedly, bouncing up and down on Rain's shoulder.

Rain glanced at the slime and smiled, seeing the ghost of a crown hovering above his gelatinous body. From their earlier practice, he knew Dozer could 'hear' the spell's effect, though how *that* worked was a bit of a question. The crown would begin to look like a physical object if Ameliah boosted the power, but it had thus far remained immaterial, even at her maximum output. As it was, it was fully visible, just translucent.

"Why did we feel...*that*?" Remezzo asked after a moment. "It was like my bones were—"

"On fire?" Rain interrupted, not about to tell him that he was weaker than a slime. "That's what happens when you exceed your tolerance. The rule of thumb at bronze is to not let your buffs exceed ten times your level, though there's some wiggle room. You don't know this?"

"They should," Genn said. "Pardon me, Miss Tiger, but four points isn't going to make much of a difference."

Rain had to stifle an undignified giggle. *Miss Tiger!*

"Can you add more to Strength and Vigor?" Genn continued, oblivious. "Or can you give me more than the others, since I can take it?"

"It's all or nothing," Ameliah lied. "Mouse, your turn."

"Is this really wise?" Bryz asked. "I know you're silver, but this seems a little reckless, running full speed in the dark..."

"What dark?" Rain asked, activating Radiance and boosting the light from Genn's orb to fill the entire tunnel. Next, he activated Essence Well, sending mana to both Ameliah and himself. On the next tick, Ameliah activated Energy Well, transforming the mana he was feeding her into stamina and spreading it around the group. Meanwhile, he bumped up Purify, further brightening things, though that wasn't what he was after. Detection had just informed him of a monster corpse lying on the ground ahead, and he wanted it gone by the time they got there. The last thing he needed was for Dozer to realize there was filth down here. Only then did he activate Velocity, following Ameliah's example and starting at a pathetic one percent.

Despite his restraint, more than one of their charges managed to stumble. It probably had more to do with the sudden light show, though really, being from where they were from, their reactions seemed a bit much.

"What in the hells!?" Genn shouted.

Hells, huh? I suppose this tunnel is a bit like a highway. That'll work, but this is going to be tricky to translate.

Nudging Velocity up to two percent, Rain didn't bother being gradual with his voice, instead pushing it straight to eleven. "Livin' easy! Lovin' free! Season ticket on a one-way ride!"