

247: Onion

Staavo sniffed, resisting the urge to wipe at eyes burning from the toxic gas assaulting them.

He had not talked Vanna down. Not in a week, anyway.

"Did I not say *diced*?" said Goodbread, a hand entering Staavo's watery field of view and selecting a fragment of onion. "This is chopped at best."

"Chopped, diced, there's no bloody difference!" Staavo snapped, looking up at the tall cervidian who'd come to rule the kitchens despite being only an aspirant. Goodbread was actually the man's real name, though it wasn't clear whether he'd taken it before or after taking up cooking. Being unawakened, his antlers were only nubs, but he sure didn't act like it. Like Tallheart, the man was tall, deep-voiced, and infuriating.

And infuriatingly good at his job.

The man didn't even eat meat, yet had somehow managed to improve Jamus's Aoaka stew recipe. People were *still* talking about it.

"Doing poorly on purpose will not make me dismiss you early," Goodbread said, tossing the onion chunk back on his cutting board. "You have five minutes left in your shift. That is five minutes to correct"—he waved a hand—"this. If I continue to be unsatisfied, I will have Vanna add another day to your sentence."

"I'll give you something to correct," Staavo muttered, but if Goodbread heard him, he pretended otherwise, walking away with a sniff.

"I told you it wouldn't work," Bluewash whispered conspiratorially.

"The shame of a poor effort is its own punishment," Reason said from Staavo's other elbow, standing over his own cutting board, piled with a mound of perfectly neat onion cubes.

"Oh, shut up," Staavo said. He slid the pile of rough-chopped onions back in front of himself, going at them with fury until he'd reduced them to acceptably small bits.

Who eats onions for breakfast, anyway?

Finished, he roughly scraped his cutting board's contents into a bowl before shoving it to the edge of the table. After a moment, one of Goodbread's minions grabbed it up, took one peek inside, and gave him a reproachful look.

"Oh, they're *diced*," Staavo said, tossing his knife into the wash bin.

Instead of the expected clatter, there was a wet slap.

Staavo winced. "Ah, shit."

"What did Goodbread say about throwing knives?" Bluewash admonished, hurrying to the bin. Reaching in with both hands, she extracted Zero, Staavo's knife floating half-inside the Essence Slime beside a cluster of Tel. She murmured soothingly, fixing Staavo with a scathing glare. "You're lucky she's uncuttable. If she were a regular slime, that could have been very bad."

Zero abruptly spat out the cleaned knife with a pop, and Bluewash yelped, reaching out to snag the knife by the blade before it hit the ground.

"A falling knife has no handle," Reason said.

"Oh, hush," Bluewash said, waving the knife. "I'm uncuttable too, at least by these dull things." She set the actually-quite-sharp knife down beside the bin. "Not throwing them is about respect."

"Okay, Samson," Staavo said.

Bluewash gave him a look. "Huh?"

Staavo rolled his eyes. "Says he's not about that swords-are-your-lover bullshit, but treats them like it anyway. Never mind. Gimme." Having walked over to Bluewash, he plucked Zero from her arms. "Here, Gooball, have some onion juice as an apology."

Bluewash chuckled. "When do you think she'll divide, anyway? We've been feeding her quite a lot."

"What am I, a slime scientist?" Staavo asked, struggling not to smile as the essence slime eagerly cleaned his fingers. As much as it tickled, he had an image to maintain. Accordingly, the moment Zero finished, he passed her to Reason. "Come on. We're getting to the core today."

"I'm ready," Bluewash signed, looking up from the stone table at the heart of the ruins.

"Are you sure you are up to the challenge?" Staavo signed back, or something to that effect. She was still learning the language. Not knowing all the signs didn't mean she missed the mocking crinkle at the corner of his eyes.

He's just trying to make me feel competitive. I'll show him.

Undaunted, she mocked back, wobbling her head side to side—a gesture the old Sadiiri probably wouldn't understand. These people actually stuck their tongues out at each other to convey what she meant to, which, aside from being impossible without taking out her regulator, was entirely too lewd.

Lyn wove to get her attention. "Our air won't last forever."

Bluewash nodded to the Defender, who was in charge for today, then did a quick survey of the others. Their party consisted of herself, Staavo, Reason, Mereck, Lyn, Evonna, Carten, and Ander. Having not just one but *four* Defenders on a delve team was almost as strange as one of those Defenders being a cervidian, but that was Ascension for you. Not that she didn't like Ander. Ander was great. And not that having four Defenders was strange if you considered the lair's nature and what they were aiming to accomplish. The Breathless Wasteland had turned out to be a puzzler after all, but there was a combat element that—

"Blue?" Lyn signed, using the sign for the color—not that people hadn't started calling her by that as a nickname anyway. "Today?"

"Right, sorry," Bluewash signed, looking down at the table and shaking out her fingers.

There, painted with dry and cracking paint on a grid of tiles, was the jumbled image of an oasis. The tiles were placed in a four-by-four grid with one tile missing. The task was to unscramble the picture by sliding the tiles around, using that open spot—which, according to Captain Rain, was a legendary and nigh-impossible task that had vexed and confounded even the greatest thinkers of history since time immemorial.

She *really* didn't understand the captain's humor.

Wordlessly, she began before anyone could further prompt her, and the moment she touched the first piece, a sudden gust sent dust swirling into the hydrogen atmosphere. She didn't look up, but heard the screech that heralded the arrival of the first Thirst Shade. The moisture-draining pseudo-elementals were unreasonably dangerous for level-four monsters, but they weren't her problem. The Defenders would handle them.

Her hands a blur, she slid tile after tile, relying more on silver-level speed and intuition than patterns and logic. Row by row, she worked her way down, solving the top two rows before she'd taken more than ten breaths from her respirator. The third row took another ten breaths, which wasn't bad, but hardly as fast as she'd hoped. Then the real trouble began—solving the last row without destroying everything she'd done so far. This is where she always got hung up in practice.

After twenty breaths, her worst fears had come true, and frustrated, she looked up to see the Defenders holding off literally dozens of the swirling sand monsters. With Arcane Resistance rings, they were immune to the worst any single monster could dish out, but there was a danger should any of them be struck by more than two or three attacks at once. From the way Mereck was hovering, she guessed one of them already had been.

Redoubling her focus, she returned to the puzzle, but after another twenty breaths, and with her frustration turned fully to shame, she looked up to see Staavo watching with a smug expression. As much as she wanted to slap his hand away when he reached for the board, she didn't. Pride was useless, and she had little enough to begin with. Pride was for her older siblings. She got herself in trouble without it just fine.

After only a few more breaths, and like she hadn't done most of the hard work, Staavo slid the last tile into place with a click. The dust filling the atmosphere fell to the ground as if drawn there, including that making up the bodies of the Thirst Shades, whose health bars simultaneously vanished.

"Easy," Staavo signed, making her chew harder than she should have on her regulator.

The ground began to rumble, and beside the table, a pillar started grinding its way up from the dusty stone. Meanwhile, Reason, having stood back this whole time, waved his hands to disperse their collected exhalations. As much as they'd done to prevent the chance of sparks, having someone with Fume Control around did a lot to make her feel better. Not that she felt *great*, of course, with the highly pressurized air tank on her back. Lugging around what amounted to a bomb would put anyone on edge.

The pillar locked into place with a clunk, and there was a brilliant flash of light as an unassuming wooden chest materialized atop it. On the front of the chest above the latch was carved a ragged number ten.

As exciting as that was, they wouldn't be opening it. Taking the reward would deplete the lair's charge, something they were doing their best to avoid. It was the same reason they couldn't kill the monsters.

"That was our best time, by far," Mereck signed, having finished healing Carten, who'd apparently been the one who'd gotten hit. "The two of you should work together from now on. Bluewash is faster, but Staavo is better at the patterns."

"Two minds, four hands," Reason signed.

"I'm fine with working together," Bluewash said, ignoring the Chemist's nonsense and looking down at the puzzle table, which had transformed at the same time as the flash.

The empty tile hadn't moved, but the picture was jumbled again. Once solved, it would depict a robed figure standing beside the oasis with its hands outstretched ominously. The sequential image told the fictional story of how the oasis had dried up and, presumably, how the air had been robbed of its life-supporting quality, though they hadn't gotten that far. How anyone was meant to solve ten of these things while holding their breath was beyond her. The first time they'd visited the ruins, they'd had only hoses, no regulators or pressurized tanks, and they'd run out of air before even getting a chance to try the first puzzle.

Arcane lairs are mean.

"Want to try again?" Staavo signed, still mocking.

Nodding firmly, she ignored the provocation, checking the gauge on her tank before she began. As before, the moment she touched the first tile, dust flew everywhere. The first Thirst Shade's screech joined the rumble of the pillar as it descended, taking the chest with it.

Mercifully, everything just seemed to go right this time. After not even thirty breaths, she slid the last tile home, then looked up and wiggled her head at Staavo as the ground trembled.

Staavo made a show of clapping as a new chest flashed into existence. This one was still wooden, but of much higher quality—mahogany or something—and it bore the number nine in white paint. She barely even glanced at it, more interested in making sure the Defenders were good to continue. Once she was sure they were, she began again.

Unfortunately, things again turned sour on the fourth row, and she dutifully stepped aside when it became clear she needed help. Staavo completed it in short order, his smugness returning in full force. Abrasive personality aside, the old scholar *was* brilliant. You just had to get used to him.

On and on it went, the chests growing progressively finer as they worked their way through each image. When they got to the sixth puzzle, passing their previous record, things slowed down, as they no longer knew what the images were supposed to be. Still, they muddled through, even starting to alternate mid-puzzle as they became more comfortable working with each other. By the tenth image, they'd even managed to speed up again. Staavo had stopped trying to move the pieces himself, instead calling her attention to particular tiles and letting her use her superior dexterity.

And then it was over.

"That was impressive," Mereck signed as the ground shook. "You two make a good team."

Bluewash grinned behind her regulator, looking up to see the pillar snap into place. The chest that materialized atop it was solid gold, studded with diamonds and rubies, and banded with a pale metal that was probably platinum. The number '1' on the front glowed purple with Arcane magic. With the lair only being rank four, the chest was probably more valuable than whatever was inside it, but unlike the contents, it wouldn't last long if taken outside.

"Hey," said a voice unexpectedly, high-pitched from the lightweight gas.

Bluewash looked around to see Staavo holding his regulator in one hand, holding the other high above his head, palm facing her. He nodded significantly to it. "Don't leave me hanging, girl."

"What?" Bluewash signed, trying not to look at his lips.

"He wishes for you to slap his hand," Ander said, the cervidian's normally deep voice coming out only slightly lower than Staavo's. He replaced the regulator he'd removed, taking a heavy pull from it, clearly out of breath.

"Why?" Bluewash signed.

Ander tilted his head, removing his regulator once more. "Is it not a human thing? I have seen multiple people do it."

"It's a Rain thing," Carten said, nodding like an expert. "It's the highest of fives. It's fer celebratin'."

Evonna nodded, equally serious. "Not performing a high five someone has set up is the peak of rudeness."

"Um, okay?" Bluewash mumbled around her regulator with some difficulty. She looked at Staavo's still-raised hand, then jumped to slap it. As she landed, she returned to hand code.

"We are not done, though. Look. Five-by-five."

Staavo looked down at the puzzle table, then began to swear, the string of expletives coming out like the chattering of an irate chipmunk. Used as she'd grown to everyone's voices, Bluewash couldn't bottle up her laughter at that, which was actually quite dangerous. Once one person started laughing, the sound could set off the others—and indeed it did, Carten letting out a full-bellied guffaw before Evonna slapped a hand over his mouth. Bluewash quickly managed to get herself under control, and fortunately, the chain reaction went no further.

"How long will it take you to solve?" Lyn asked aloud once everyone had calmed down and had a chance to drink from their canteens.

"I'm not sure," Bluewash signed. "I've never done a five-by-five." She hesitated. "This is the last one, though. I am sure. Core Intuition says so."

"Well, what are we waiting for, lightning monsters to show up?" Staavo signed.

"Don't even joke about that," Mereck signed.

"My air is low," Evonna signed. "I don't know if I have enough for a core panic." She looked at Bluewash. "There will be a core panic, yes?"

Bluewash nodded. "Until I use my skill on the core." She turned to Mereck. "The lair doesn't have another monster type. We would have seen it." She hesitated. "Probably."

"Great," Mereck signed unhappily.

"I am low on air as well," Ander signed.

Bluewash frowned. It made sense that the Defenders would have used up their air faster, but they couldn't just send someone out to get fresh tanks. The moment anyone so much as touched the barrier, everything would reset. No, they should have *brought* fresh tanks, but Tallheart had only just finished enchanting these ones.

"We're getting to the core today," Staavo signed, repeating his words from that morning with great determination.

"I have enough air over here," Mereck signed, tapping his tank. "Trade?"

"Good idea," Staavo said, spitting out his regulator and shrugging out of the straps holding the tank to his back. "Smart people trade with dumb people."

"Oi!" Carten said, though he was already removing his own tank. "Don' call yerself dumb!"

Checking her own regulator, Bluewash hesitated. She did indeed have enough left, but...

"Here," Evonna said, holding out her regulator to her after taking a long breath from it. "Blue?"

Blue stared at the regulator like it was a snake. Unlike hers, which had a rubbery mask that shrouded her nose and cheeks, Evonna's was the standard design—just a bare mouthpiece and a bulky valve thing.

"Seriously?" Evonna asked. "You're going to let your hangups jeopardize the mission?"

Blushing furiously, Bluewash snatched the regulator out of the other woman's hand, swapping it for her own before she could think better of it.

"Humans," Ander said, rumbling with high-pitched amusement as he swapped with Reason.

"Gah! What the hells did you eat for breakfast?" Staavo spluttered, spitting out Carten's regulator to glare at him. "Oh, right. Onions."

"Let's just start," Bluewash mumbled, mercifully tasting nothing oniony about her own borrowed regulator. Honestly, any sanitary concerns paled beside the horror of being *exposed*.

"Start, then," Lyn said with a gesture.

Bluewash started, and the panic of what came next pushed all worries about embarrassment out of her mind. Indeed it was a panic, and in the literal sense, for the core went wild the moment the pillar began to retract, carrying away its final attempted bribe. The screech of the Thirst Shades was ear-splitting as all of them spawned at once—the lair throwing literally everything it had at them to stop her from exposing the core.

Fortunately, the five-by-five puzzle was no different than the four-by-four, just larger. With Staavo's help, they chewed through it, realizing that the picture was one of these very ruins in their current state, right down to the eight of them standing around the puzzle table with their tanks and Ascension overcoats.

"Hurry up!" Carten shouted, his voice sounding hoarse even with the pitch altered.

Staavo pointed, and Bluewash moved like lightning, swapping six tiles in rapid sequence before sliding the final piece into place. With a flash, the entire board vanished, revealing a stone vault in which the core rested. The purple gem was about the size of an onion, fittingly enough, floating without obvious support. She hesitated not at all to reach in and grab it, and as she did, everything fell silent, the monsters vanishing to dust as she used her skill.

Core Access

Breathless Wasteland - Rank 4

Arcane: 92% Chemical: 6% Cold: 2%

Charge: 100%

Integrity: 100%

Sub-Cores: 0/0

Age: 347 years

Accolade: Tier-1 Skill

Monster Templates: 1/1

Thirst Shade [2]

Modifiers: 3/3

Puzzle [Arcane]

Hostile Atmosphere [Chemical]

Thirst [Arcane]

Bluewash grinned around her regulator in satisfaction as she read the floating text.

This was the skill that had made her as a Coresmith. It was aberrant, but only in a very minor way, listing more detail than usual. Nobody she'd ever heard of but her could see modifiers. It wasn't a big advantage, helping her guess what a particular core would be suitable for, but the fact that she was special made for great motivation. The rest of her success she'd earned through hard work, study, and dedication.

Until she'd lost it all, anyway.

"Well?" Staavo signed as the others puffed heavily from their regulators. "Do the thing already!"

"Thinking," Bluewash signed, hesitating over the accolade listing. A skill accolade wasn't easy to pass up. With the core at full, the drop would be a good one. That said, Ascension had voted on what to do with the lair. It wasn't the type to ever spawn a blue, not with the way it summoned and dismissed its monsters, but that didn't mean it couldn't be exploited. Nobody had the skills to recharge it *now*, but Ameliah could get them, and she and Rain would be back soon enough. Besides, she couldn't say she was upset about the decision. It centered on her, after all.

She slipped her other hand into the vault to gently cup the core between them.

Core Override

Core Command: Calve

Core Stabilization

A thunderous crack resounded, and the very fabric of space shook as the lair's integrity dropped to fifty percent. Its charge plummeted more slowly, but it didn't stop, continuing until the lair was completely drained. The two halves of the lair's fractured core split apart as she spread her hands, both trying to get away from her. Releasing one—the original—to zip back to the center of its earthen vault, she grasped the one she'd captured firmly. "Time to go!" she signed with her free hand, then without waiting, sprinted from the ruins, cradling the newly-born sub-core against her chest.

Breathless Wasteland Sub-Core - Rank 4

Arcane: 100%

Charge: 50%

Integrity: 50%

Age: 0 years

Smiling as she read its status, Bluewash drew deeply from her regulator, barely even noticing the way it didn't cover her cheeks. Her smile didn't last long, though, as now that she'd touched the lair's core, she could access its details from anywhere inside the barrier, and what she was seeing wasn't good.

Breathless Wasteland - Rank 4

Arcane: 92% Chemical: 6% Cold: 2%

Charge: 0%

Integrity: 36%

Sub-Cores: 1/0

Age: 347 years

The integrity was dropping faster than she'd expected. A lair of this rank was *not* supposed to have a sub-core, and if she didn't get it out of here in time, the main core would shatter. The sub-core would have shattered instead already had she not been stabilizing it. Fortunately, she hadn't neglected her physical stats entirely when she'd decided to become a crafter, and she was moving so fast by the time the barrier appeared that she scarcely had time to use Core Extraction.

And then she was through.

And then she tripped.

Wailing in tinny distress, her regulator going flying, she curled into a protective ball around her prize. The ground showed her little mercy as she plowed into it, and she cursed Corrin for having compacted the dirt over the days they'd been working here. "Ooph!" she cried, somersaulting into the rear wall hard enough to tear the air tank from its straps.

"What has happened," Tallheart rumbled urgently, and Bluewash felt a strong hand grip her shoulder, steadying her on the rebound. "Are you injured?"

"F-fine," Bluewash gasped, sucking in a lungful of sweet-tasting air but refusing to unclench from around the sub-core, as doing so would also reveal her face.

"The others?" Samson asked, out of sight, but the Swordsman's question was answered by Lyn.

"What the hells, Blue?!" the Defender demanded in her chipmunk voice, scrambling to stop before she crashed into the wall beside her.

Bluewash didn't answer other than to release the laughter bubbling up from inside her. Rolling onto her back and burying her mouth in her elbow, she thrust up her other hand in victory, holding the sub-core aloft.

Now, she just needed to figure out what she was going to actually make.