

## Chapter 13 – The Jump

The platform curved around a conglomeration of massive pipes, and soon we were out of sight of the toll-takers.

“You’re too quick to resort to violence,” I said quietly.

“You’re too hesitant to solve things decisively,” he replied.

I didn’t want to get into an argument and was happy he’d cooperated when I took charge of the situation, so I let the matter drop. “You said this was where we go down, right?”

“It should be just ahead.”

Sure enough, only a few minutes later, we found a steep ladder. For twenty minutes, we navigated a series of stairs, ladders, and ramps. Gradually, both the air pressure and the lighting changed. For most of the trip so far, we’d either used flashlights or relied on the lighting built into the main pathways of the Shield. Now, ambient light filtered up from below.

“What’s *prinker* mean?” I asked.

He made a spitting sound. “It’s First Heaven slang. It means ‘someone who has sex with their grandmother.’”

I almost laughed. “So it’s the equivalent of *motherfucker*?”

He shook his head. “No, worse than that. It’s nasty no matter how you say it. I could call you a motherfucker if you beat me at a game of pool, right? Or in plenty of other contexts. But you can never call your friend a *prinker*, not even as a joke.”

Wind touched our faces as the ambient light grew brighter, and finally, about thirty minutes after leaving the platform, we reached the bottom of the Shield. When Jakobe, Elena, and I had climbed the Third Shield, we started at the bottom of one of the enormous girders. This time, we were ending our climb in a similar location, except on a platform that seemed designed for vehicle landings. There were equipment lockers off to the side, scuff marks from

vehicle landings and takeoffs, and old paint that marked out parking spaces and lanes of movement.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“An old Cross-Level Control landing station. Abandoned now.”

Looking around more closely, I saw signs indicating just that. There was dust built up in many of the corners, and closer examination revealed that all the storage spaces were empty.

Walking to the edge of the platform, I gripped the handrail and looked down into the Second Heaven. A faint wave of vertigo swept through me. I wasn't afraid of heights, but I don't think anyone could stare down at a view like this and not feel a bit dizzy.

We were far from the Heaven-Propping Pillar, but its brightness still spread out to cover the lands below. Furthermore, I noticed additional areas of lighting, domed buildings that vaguely resembled orgplants, except smoother and emanating light.

“It's bright. And there's so much green,” I said. I spotted entire sections that seemed to be covered with vegetation. “Where are the high-rises?”

“Did you really grow up in the Third Heaven?” Itsuki asked. “Surely you noticed the difference in population density between there and everything higher.”

“Yeah, but I never thought much about what it was like in the Second Heaven.”

“Well, the trend holds true. The Second has a fifth of the population of the Third and an additional Ring Road. Just do the math. There's a section west of the Heaven-Propping Pillar that they call Uptown, and you'll find high-rises there. Outside of that area, though, they're just not needed.”

While Itsuki started laying his wingsuit out on the platform and prepping his other equipment, I took one last look at the cityscape. “I don't see any CLC patrols.”

“According to my contact in the Third Heaven, they downsized the patrol force here. They were getting noise complaints, especially past the Third Ring Road.”

“Won't that increase the number of smugglers who drop down, just like we're doing?”

He shrugged. "The elites in the First and Second Heaven are behind a lot of the smuggling operations. Maybe they phased down CLC patrols to make things easier for themselves. It doesn't matter to us, right? Get your suit ready."

I'd always thought of the First and Second Heaven, and especially the First, as places where law and order reigned supreme. Was it really possible that powerful people there would be so deeply involved in breaking the law?

I unzipped my backpack and pulled the suit out.

"Remember," Itsuki said, "you want to stay symmetrical. Don't bend your knees too much, and don't forget your Gravitational root. We need to stick close to each other so your Thermal Ripple Cloak keeps us both invisible, but at the same time, stay properly staggered so that..."

He went on to repeat the same instructions and reminders he'd already hammered into me three times in the hotel room, twice in the car, and once about an hour ago while climbing down.

I listened as intently this time as I had before. Normally speaking, only Corpses with Gravitational cultivation bases were approved to train with wingsuits, and even then, they went through hundreds of hours of training in parachuting before they put the suit on. Here I was, a complete amateur who had never even parachuted once, attempting something most people would consider suicidal. Itsuki had assured me repeatedly that as long as I did what he said, it would be fine.

After we both had everything laid out, we checked all our gear three times, then suited up. I'd previously been excited about the idea of flying through the air this way, but now that I could actually look down at the city below, my heart thumped nervously in my chest.

"Go time," Itsuki said. "We're going to try to make as much distance as possible before deploying our chutes."

"Yeah, I remember. I'm starting the Thermal Ripple Cloak."

I deployed the cloak, causing both of us to disappear. We could now only "see" each other with divine sense.

"READY?" he asked.

"YES."

We both took a few deep breaths, then Itsuki stepped forward and jumped. I followed shortly thereafter.

I turned weightless, and somehow, everything seemed to slow down. We dropped down for a short time, until the wind pushed against our suits, and then we angled ourselves and started picking up speed. I suddenly realized I could see Purgatory from this angle, and it surprised me that it wasn't pitch black.

"WE'RE DOING WELL," Itsuki said. "EXTEND YOUR WINGS A BIT. WE WANT TO INCREASE OUR LIFT AND GLIDE RATIO."

We slowed slightly, and I looked down at the terrain of the Second Heaven passing by, but at the same time, getting closer.

I felt free, my mind almost empty as I reveled in the sensation of being like a bird. About twenty seconds later, my gaze shifted a bit to the left, and something caught my attention. Something moving in the air.

"ITSUKI, THERE'S A PATROL VEHICLE!"

"WHAT? WHERE?"

"TO THE LEFT. I THOUGHT YOU SAID THEY STOPPED RUNNING PATROLS."

"I SAID THEY CUT BACK. LOOK, WE'RE INVISIBLE, SO IT DOESN'T MATTER. JUST STAY ON COURSE."

We kept on flying, but to my dismay, it looked like the vehicle was moving in a path that would directly intersect with our own. As we zoomed closer, it became clear that's exactly what was happening.

"ALL RIGHT," Itsuki said, "WE'RE GOING TO ANGLE DOWN AND GO UNDER IT. ON MY MARK. THREE. TWO. ONE. GO."

I tilted forward to follow Itsuki, picking up speed as we angled down. Closer and closer the vehicle came, and then we sped underneath it. In my mind, we were only feet from it, but in reality, it was several dozen yards above us.

We zipped past the CLC vehicle, and I breathed a sigh of relief. However, only a handful of seconds later, out of nowhere, Itsuki suddenly lost control. One moment, he was gliding along just ahead of me and to the right, and then he tumbled to the side and I swished

past him. Looking over my shoulder, I saw him flipping head over heels and starting to plummet downward, already out of the protective invisibility of my Thermal Ripple Cloak.

Shit. I needed to deploy my parachute fast, so I could get back and help him. Mind buzzing with anxiety, I slowed down and changed my angle, trying hard to maintain symmetry in my arms and legs. Then I deployed the chute.

The air tugged at me, and the feeling of weightlessness vanished. Again I turned my head to try to catch sight of Itsuki and saw him deploy his own chute moments before disappearing into some trees. Focusing back on myself, I kept my parachute steady as I dropped toward the ground. I was lucky to land in a wide-open field of grass at the far end of which was a fence or wall of some sort. I don't think I'd ever seen so much greenery in my life.

The parachute flopped onto the ground, and I waved my hand to unhook it and suck it into my dimensional pendant. There would be time later to fold it back up properly. I struggled out of the wingsuit and stowed it in my pendant as well. The entire process took minutes that felt like hours.

Keeping my Thermal Ripple Cloak up, I hurried across the green grass in the direction of the trees where Itsuki had likely landed. Glancing around, I noticed buildings in the distance and to the right, forming almost a triangle between me and the trees. Tapping into my Gravitational root of energy, I increased my speed. I ran through the field with superhuman agility, closing in on the trees at least five times as quickly as it would have taken an ordinary human.

Once past the tree line, I let the Thermal Ripple Cloak drop.

Trees weren't uncommon in the Grand Kingdom and could be seen in parks, apartment complexes, and other places. But even in the parks, they were rarely grouped together in such numbers. There had to be hundreds of them here. And while the parks usually had trees planted in very neat rows, these seemed to be growing in a completely random way. The ground rolled up and dipped in different places, forming small hills and depressions, and those areas that didn't have bushes and boulders next to the trees were covered with dead leaves.

The smell that met me was odd. It was damp and clung to the insides of my nose, almost like rot, except in a good way. In a way that felt... alive. It was an odor the likes of which I'd never encountered before in all my life, and it was so new that it caused me to stop in my tracks for a moment just to adjust to the sensation. The sound was also unique. There were buzzes, clicks, chirps, presumably from living things.

It occurred to me that there was a word for 'a group of trees.' *Forest*. You hardly ever saw that word except in books. I shook my head briefly and walked into the forest, eyes darting here and there as I looked for signs of Itsuki. A few flowers poked up in different spots of the forest floor, as well as at the bases of the boulders. Many of the tree trunks were green with moss and lichen.

At the highest levels, the range of a diamond-level cultivator's divine sense could get close to sixty feet, and thanks to the blessing of the Sun's Blood, my Solar diamond was about as powerful as possible. But not even that range of divine sense helped much considering how vast the forest was.

I had no idea if there were people in the vicinity, so I was hesitant to make too much noise. Raising my voice a bit, but not yelling, I called, "Itsuki! Itsuki, where are you?"

I reached the top of a small hill and hopped onto a boulder that rested sidelong on its crest. From there, I spotted a swaying mass of white and blue a good hundred feet away. It looked like Itsuki's parachute had caught in the tree canopy, and he was hanging there.

Hopping off the boulder, I ran in that direction. About halfway there, the whine of turbines caught my ear, as well as a voice speaking through a PA system.

*Not good*, I thought, as the words became clear.

"...and put your hands up. Remain in place, do not attempt to flee. Officers will arrive at your location shortly.... Unknown infiltrator, stand down, get your ID card ready, and put your hands up. Remain in place, do not attempt to flee...."

I saw motion overhead as the Cross-Level Control patrol vehicle slowly drifted by. It passed, and the words faded into inaudibility. However, I could tell that the vehicle was making a turn to circle back around. Rushing ahead, I reached Itsuki's location and saw him hanging about ten feet above ground level, head slumped on his chest.

Reaching out with divine sense, I virtually shouted into his mind, *ITSUKI! ITSUKI! WAKE UP, WE HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE. WAKE UP!*

He raised his head and almost immediately scrambled to release himself. A moment later, he dropped to the ground.

"HOW LONG HAS IT BEEN?" he asked.

"MINUTES. WHAT HAPPENED?"

“MALFUNCTION. THE LINING TORE. I SWEAR, I’LL GO BACK TO THE THIRD HEAVEN, FIND THAT DEALER, AND GUT HIM.”

Waving his hand, he sucked his parachute away and quickly got out of his wingsuit.

The sound of turbines grew louder, as did the PA announcement. “...will arrive at your location shortly.... Unknown infiltrator, stand down, get your ID card ready, and put your hands....”

“THE CLC IS FULL OF LAZY COWARDS,” Itsuki said as he stowed the last of his gear in his dimensional device. “THEY’RE JUST CIRCLING UP THERE WAITING FOR BACKUP TO ARRIVE. IF THEY LANDED AND CAME AFTER US ON FOOT, WE WOULDN’T HAVE A CHANCE. AT LEAST, IF WE WERE ORDINARY SMUGGLERS.”

I couldn’t argue with that. “WELL, IT’S GOOD FOR US. I SAW SOME BUILDINGS NEARBY. DO WE HEAD TOWARD THEM, OR AWAY FROM THEM?”

“CLC WILL DEFINITELY GO THERE TO ASK QUESTIONS. WE HEAD TOWARD PURGATORY. WE DIDN’T GET AS CLOSE AS I’D HOPED, BUT WE’RE NEAR ENOUGH. SEE, AREN’T YOU GLAD I TOLD YOU TO CONSERVE ENERGY FOR YOUR THERMAL RIPPLE CLOAK? GET READY TO CAST IT.”