

161: Hive

Ameliah's lungs felt tired as she half-walked, half-swam down the tunnel. The air pressure had increased to the point that breathing felt distinctly wrong. Rain said there was plenty of oxygen, so that wasn't an issue at least. Granted, she hadn't even known what oxygen *was* until he'd explained it to her a few weeks ago. Chemists knew about the gas, sure, given that there was a word for it, but she wasn't a Chemist. All she knew was that, right now, it felt like she was breathing a liquid instead.

It was unsettling.

It can't get any thicker than this, can it?

Shaking her head, Ameliah set her worries aside, then waved to catch Rain's attention. Speech was basically impossible here, so she signed to him in hand code. "The Game."

Rain missed a step and had to windmill his arms to avoid toppling over. He recovered, coming to a stop and looking at her. She smiled, feeling him glaring at her through his visor. The effect was spoiled somewhat by the cheery glow of his armor, filling the tunnel with a golden light. That light brightened slightly, and Rain raised his hands to speak.

"Damn it! Can't you just call it 'the Silent Steps accolade' like I asked you to?"

"No," Ameliah signed back, smirking at him. "Your reactions are just too funny."

"Come on," Rain replied. "Show mercy."

“Hey, you’re the one who’s dangling a secret in front of me. Tell me what the name means, and maybe I’ll stop.”

“I refuse,” Rain signed, slashing his hand in abject negation. “Too dangerous.”

Tallheart raised a hand, interrupting them as he entered the conversation. “What is the delay?”

“Time to refresh our buffs,” Ameliah signed back.

“Understood,” Tallheart replied before crossing his arms.

Ameliah nodded to him. *He’s getting better at hand code. Winter at work.*

Rain shifted, and Ameliah turned to see him holding out a light-gray rectangle of metal.

Accolade of The Game
Grants the ability to use Soften Steps

Taking the accolade, she bound it, and a bud of capability blossomed in her mind. She pressed on this, triggering the skill. Like Rain and Tallheart, she’d long since ranked Silent Steps to max, which meant the effect would last for thirty minutes unless she canceled it.

Passing the plate to Tallheart, she turned back to Rain and thanked him now that her hands were free.

“I don’t know why we’re bothering with this,” Rain signed back. He paused to accept the plate from Tallheart, then vanished it with a needless flourish before continuing. “If the air gets any

denser, swimming is going to be easier than walking. The sound of our footsteps won't be a problem, then." He flapped his arms, rising off the ground slightly before settling back down to continue. "This is nuts!"

"Arcane," Ameliah signed back with a shrug, though she fully agreed with him about how insane this Biome was—insane being what 'nuts' meant in Rain-speak. Brightside had been nothing like this. There had been darkness, toxic mist, and deadly monsters, but all of that was perfectly reasonable and expected. This was just bizarre.

At least we can breathe the air, though. Somehow. It's got Brightside beat in that respect.

"Come," Tallheart signed, tilting his head back in the direction they'd been traveling. "We must be close."

Ameliah nodded, then resumed moving down the tunnel. Beside her, Rain kicked off the ground, flailing wildly with his feet and clawing at the air with his hands like a mole clawing at dirt. To her amazement, he actually managed to keep himself off the ground, his motions becoming faster and more controlled as his speed increased.

No...not just controlled. That's a technique.

Ameliah shook her head. *Of course he knows how to swim. I'm the weird one.*

Rain let himself settle back to the ground, not because he had to, but because he was getting too far ahead. Landing silently, he spun to face them, raising his visor to reveal an enormous, goofy grin. Ameliah couldn't help but smile in response.

"Did you see that!?" Rain signed, his wild gestures conveying his excitement.

"Impressive," Tallheart signed back. "It appeared to be tiring. Now put your visor down before something eats you." He shook his head, gesturing dismissively before turning away.

"Humans."

Ameliah tried to laugh, but choked on the heavy air. She struggled, reaching for her throat and fighting against a sudden urge to vomit. Fortunately, Rain was busy berating Tallheart, and she managed to regain control of herself before either of them noticed her distress.

I'm getting used to it, but gods. Is this what drowning feels like?

...

I should work on that whole swimming thing. Not that I need it with movement skills. It's just embarrassing.

"Ameliah?" Rain signed, looking at her.

"Coming," Ameliah replied, waving a hand. "Sorry."

I'll ask him to teach me later.

They continued down the tunnel, Rain's light occasionally flickering as he used Detection to keep them headed in the correct direction. Radiance was nice in that its light wouldn't carry beyond its range. They'd still be visible from a distance in an unobstructed tunnel, of course, but compared to Fire Arrow, the skill was practically covert. Rain had control over the power,

thanks to Channel Mastery. He was running it at the bare minimum for them to see, only boosting it when they needed to communicate with each other. It still wasn't the most mana-efficient thing in the world, but Rain said he was having less trouble there, now that they were deeper. If the measurements he'd made in his soul were to be believed, this area was rank 26. Perhaps higher. It had been an hour since he'd last checked, after all.

Ameliah was just about to suggest that he check again when Rain stopped on his own, raising his hand in the signal for 'enemies.'

Quickly slipping her bow off her shoulder, Ameliah set her feet, the tunnel falling completely into darkness as Rain dropped Radiance for Detection. She waited, struggling against a sudden bout of irrational fear. In Brightside, darkness was death, and she didn't have Lunar Orb to—

Stop.

Another second passed, and light returned, revealing Rain signaling rapidly.

"Four workers in our tunnel. No Hunter." He pointed back the way they'd come. "About twenty seconds till they round the bend. Nowhere to hide, so we fight."

Nodding, Ameliah turned in the indicated direction, drawing an arrow. She left it unlit as she nocked it, and the tunnel fell into complete darkness once more. Silently, she began to count. The Workers wouldn't be able to see them. Unlike Hunters, they had no constant crackle of electricity to provide light. Ameliah wasn't sure how they and the Scavengers avoided bumping into the walls all the time, but whatever senses the lesser Sparkscales had, they were short-range. Ambushes worked on both types surprisingly well.

When her count reached fifteen, she drew. At twenty-two, golden light rushed past her, illuminating the tunnel and the four Workers in the distance. She loosed immediately, and her shaft took the furthest monster between the eyes. As it died, the others twitched in silent surprise, then sped forward. Ameliah raised an eyebrow at that, having been preparing to chase after them, but she didn't let it disrupt her rhythm. She fired thrice more, easily downing the remaining monsters before they reached them. The threat dealt with, she allowed herself to frown, watching the bodies drift, trailing globules of blood that hovered bizarrely in the air.

Why didn't they run like they usually do? Is it because we're close to the hive?

Ameliah turned to look back at Rain, releasing the tension from her bow, but not putting away the arrow.

"Clear," he signed, moving toward her. "There are monsters around, but none in tunnels that connect to ours. We're safe for now." He gestured. "Look at all the blood, though! The way it's floating! That's so cool!"

Ameliah arched an eyebrow, then put the arrow away and slung her bow back over her shoulder so she could communicate. "What? Decided you like killing now?"

Rain jerked back sharply, as if she'd slapped him. "No, of course not," he signed after a moment's hesitation. "There's this movie where they're in space, and—" He shook his head. "Never mind. This is much grosser in real life. Yuck, I can smell it now. Hang on, I'll clean up."

Ameliah smiled softly, shaking her head as Purify's white mist replaced the golden glow of Radiance. When it began to fade, it was like the fight had never happened, not even a scale

remaining. She shivered, fighting not to gasp as Winter washed over her. Hurriedly, she drew and lit a Fire Arrow, noticing a few Tel glittering on the floor by its light.

“Brace yourself,” Rain signed, catching her attention. “I’m going to go Nova. Keep an eye out.”

Ameliah nodded. *Here we go again.*

She tightened her grip on the arrow as the cold sharpened, cutting through her armor like it wasn’t even there. Thermal Regulation did nothing.

Winter’s effect wasn’t exactly painful when he flared it like this, merely *strong*. It felt cold, yes, but the primary effect was a shocking, crystal clarity that called old memories unbidden to her mind. The arrow held in her hand seemed to dim, its light becoming feeble against the encroaching darkness.

And then she was a child, clinging to a candle that she’d—

No!

Working her jaw, Ameliah activated Energy Well. Still clutching the Fire Arrow, she set about collecting the paltry drops from the workers. Winter was tolerable if she focused on a simple task, she’d found. Something to keep herself grounded in the present. She could have asked Rain to exclude her from the effect, of course. However, with her stats boosted, her mana regeneration was significant, as such things went. She’d actually asked him to include her for that reason. The more mana she recovered herself, the less he needed to. Whatever Rain said, he was still injured.

Besides, I'm not afraid of my past. It made me who I am. I just don't like thinking about the details too closely.

Abruptly, the cold vanished, and Ameliah exhaled slowly in relief.

Rain turned to look at her, oblivious to her thoughts. "The coast is still clear, and everyone's stamina is full."

Ameliah nodded, canceling Energy Well. "How do you think you're doing on essence?" she asked. "You've been using a lot of mana."

"I should be fine," Rain said, wiggling a hand ambivalently. "I should check, though. The rank, too. Give me a minute."

"One minute," Tallheart signed, having moved silently to lean against the wall.

"Challenge accepted," Rain signed, then began to topple like a felled tree.

Ameliah smiled, watching him slam face-first into the ground, slowed by the heavy air. Thanks to Silent Steps, there wasn't even the slightest sound from the impact. The skill was poorly named, covering all contact with the ground, not merely footsteps.

He's such a goof. And I'm an idiot. I just need to focus on the happy memories. And on making more of them.

Still smiling, she started counting again, getting to seventy-six before Rain stirred, then levered himself back to his feet.

"Too slow," Tallheart signed. "Do better."

"Damn it," Rain signed back.

Fighting not to laugh, Ameliah waved the Fire Arrow, getting Rain's attention before setting it down softly so she could speak. "That was still a record. Seventy-six seconds. You're getting faster." She grinned. "Showoff."

"You'll get it soon, don't worry," Rain replied, reaching out to squeeze her shoulder.

He really believes that, doesn't he? Like it's not even a question.

After a moment, Rain took his hand away. "Pressure still reads 26," he signed. "I think we've bottomed out."

"We shall see," Tallheart replied, jerking his head down the tunnel.

Ameliah nodded, letting her arrow go out as Rain reactivated Radiance. She took the lead once more, moving with more surety than she felt. In the silence, she felt her mood sinking again. Her newfound power was exhilarating, but it was also terrifying. It was the kind of power that created monsters. Tallheart and Rain were putting entirely too much faith in her.

Ameliah chewed her lip as the words she'd spoken to Rain echoed back to her.

'Don't change.'

She tightened her grip on her bow. She could feel its power resting dormant just beneath her fingertips. Feel it pressing on her, even more heavily than the air. She'd already been corrupted once, and by far, far less.

That was Lerith, not me. I won't... I could never become... She sighed, aborting that line of thought.

I need to talk to them about this, but not when they're counting on me to keep them safe. I have to be strong. Focused.

Locking the memory of her trauma back away where it belonged, Ameliah squinted at the darkness beyond their pool of light.

Yes, this is healthy.

Shaking her head, she submerged herself in the simplicity of vigilance. The point of all this sneaking around was to find the hive without the hive finding them. Last night's defense had been going great until word of their presence had made it back to wherever the Sparkscales made their nest. Once that had happened, the assault had become relentless, to the point that she'd feared they'd be overwhelmed. Only the narrow passage to their cave had saved them, allowing them to deal with the tide of Scavengers gradually, rather than all at once. Even that wouldn't last for another night. Worker Drones, it turned out, could quarry through deepstone with their Arcane powers. They'd found the evidence of their excavations this morning.

Should I swap in Splinter Shot? Combined with Multishot, it would shred the Scavengers, and it would be much cheaper than one of Rain's Novas. Practically free. What would I get rid of,

though? Bleeder Shot? Probably. I'd lose damage, but damage isn't really my problem, is it? Maybe Healing Word? It's too weak to be worth a damn without—

Rain gestured sharply, interrupting her musing. "Stop. Cavern ahead."

Ameliah mouthed a silent curse. *I should have swapped it this morning. Too late now.*

"Monsters inside?" Tallheart asked, and Rain nodded.

"Yes. All around in the tunnels, too. All three kinds, coming and going." He gestured.

"Everything converges ahead of us in the cavern. This has to be it."

"How large is the cavern?" Tallheart asked.

Rain shook his head. "Big, but I can't sense that far yet. We're right up near the top. Let's keep going."

Ameliah nodded, and the three of them resumed their silent creep down the tunnel as Rain continued reporting the comings and the goings of the monsters. The tunnel they were in was small, twisty, and unpopular for that reason. That was why they'd picked it.

"I just sensed something new," Rain gestured after raising a hand. "In the cavern, just for a moment. Out of range now."

Ameliah glanced at Tallheart, who nodded. She nodded back, then to Rain, and they continued, moving even slower now. Soon enough, they stopped just before the final bend, not wanting their light to reveal them.

"Come," Tallheart signaled, then retrieved his Darksight artifact and settled the lenses in front of his eyes. "I will guide us the rest of the way. Extinguish the light."

"Good idea," Rain signed. He extended a hand to Tallheart, palm upward.

Tallheart looked at it, then back up at Rain.

Rain gestured emphatically with his open palm.

Tallheart sighed, taking Rain's hand in his own. Ameliah smiled, moving to take Rain's other hand, making the three of them into a chain. Rain extinguished his light, leaving only the faint blue glow of Tallheart's lenses. Even that vanished after a moment as Tallheart turned away from her. She strained her ears, picking out a deep, distant buzz that grew louder as they rounded the bend. Light came to Ameliah's eyes, flickering from the cavern ahead. The light and the buzz both sharpened as a Hunter Drone drifted into view, crackling electricity trailing from its long whiskers, the sound made odd by the weight of the air.

Ameliah held her breath, feeling Rain clamp down on her hand. Either he was scared, or he was trying to stop her from shooting it and giving them away. Probably both.

After a moment, the monster drifted out of sight again, oblivious to their presence.

Tallheart looked back at them, his blue lenses striking in the darkness. Their glow vanished after a moment, the smith's shadowy outline barely visible by the light from the cavern as he tucked the artifact away.

Ameliah nodded to him, then squeezed Rain's hand before letting her own go slack. He released her after a moment, and there was the faintest clink of metal on metal as his fingers slipped out of hers.

All three of them froze. Moving in urgent silence, Ameliah drew an arrow, preparing herself for anything. A painful thirty seconds passed before she allowed herself to exhale.

Carefully, the three of them crept forward, right up to the tunnel's mouth. Ameliah looked over the lip, and her eyes went wide.

Darkness yawned below her, making her head swim with vertigo as she stared at the dozens—no—*hundreds* of Hunter Drones swimming as points of distant light in the black. That wasn't what had made her breath freeze in her lungs. It was the lair that had done that. It hung seemingly unsupported in the void, a glowing purple soap-bubble of Arcane energy. As she goggled, something *big* swam in front of it. The monster's shadowy outline was unfamiliar. It was clearly a Sparkscale of some description, just too distant for the system to tell her its name.

Are those Workers following it? The shape is right, but they're so small in comparison...

Ameliah shivered as the enormous Sparkscale passed back out of view. This was uncharted territory for her. The largest monster she'd ever seen was an Emerald Dread Adder, and that she'd only seen from a distance. Brightsiders knew their behavioral patterns and how to avoid them.

That Sparkscale had been like something out of the ocean. Much bigger than a Dread Adder, and doubtless several times as deadly. The gulf between rank 20 and rank 26 was enormous,

which was only to be expected, given that it spanned the wall. The only other time she'd been this deep, she'd been sheltered from the reality of what lurked down here. The team she'd been with had kept a wide perimeter, killing most threats before she saw them.

Ameliah blinked, then exhaled slowly, driving the heavy air up and out of her lungs.

I might be stronger than they were. No, I AM stronger. Than all of them together.

She looked down at the weapon held in her hand. At Irony, a bow whose namesake had doubtless struck fear into the hearts of the Empire's legions.

She looked back up at the lair, watching yet another shadow pass in front of it. This shadow wasn't the enormous Sparkscale again, but a swarm of Scavengers. Hundreds of them, perhaps thousands, swimming so thickly that they appeared as a dark cloud.

I can do this.

Ameliah tightened her grip on her bow.

Or rather, I'll be able to. Splinter Shot, first. Definitely. And I need to finish Equipment Mastery.

Glancing at the others, she motioned them back from the edge. She let her fingers play over the arrow grasped in her hand as they crept back down the tunnel, away from the hive and the lair at its center.

I'll be back for you soon enough, fishes. The depths don't scare me. Not nearly as much as I scare myself.