

## 142: Biome

“Holy shit.”

Heat seeped into Rain’s helmet through the eye slit as he stood with his jaw hanging open. He raised the visor, then crinkled his nose as the sickly-sweet air rolled over his face. It had an acidic twang to it, along with a healthy dose of char, but that was nothing compared to what he was seeing. In contrast to all of the tunnels so far, which had been fairly nondescript, what he was seeing now was simply impossible.

The party’s little break at the bottom of the cliff hadn’t lasted long, not even long enough to get to the first song in the Hobbit. While Rain’s narration had been well-received, both Ameliah and Tallheart had been anxious to move on.

In the hours since then, they’d explored the two caves near where they’d climbed down. One of them was a dead end, while the other led upward—obviously not what they were looking for. They’d followed it for a while anyway, just to make sure it didn’t head down again. In the process, they’d run into plenty of monsters, none of which had presented them with any significant difficulty.

Ameliah had lightened up considerably, allowing Rain to fight beside her and Tallheart as they went. Rain wanted to think that his storytelling had had something to do with her change of heart, but he suspected the real reason was that she was starting to feel soulstrain and wanted to save her strength. He’d been periodically refilling her mana with Essence Well since they’d cleared the first chasm that morning, and for all that she’d been limiting herself to just Firebolt and Combustion, the strain was beginning to show. She wouldn’t admit it, of course, but Rain could tell.

Eventually, when it became clear that the cave wasn't going to go anywhere but up, they'd turned around and backtracked. After returning to the third chasm, they'd explored along its length, finding three more dead-end caves before encountering a promising passage with a steep slope. It was a tight squeeze in a few spots, but Tallheart had become convinced it was the right path after noticing the air getting warmer as they followed it ever downward.

Eventually, Rain had sensed open space ahead of them, so they'd dropped their packs and went ahead to check it out, leaving the torch behind. Open space usually meant a fight, the only greater clue being strategic chest-high walls. It wasn't long before they'd noticed a reddish light coming from ahead. Detection had informed Rain of an unknown monster waiting for them, and he'd activated his combat macros in response. The party had slowed to a cautious crawl for the last few meters, and that had brought them to be here.

Looking at this.

"Holy shit."

"You have already said that," Tallheart rumbled, standing beside Rain with his arms crossed unconcernedly.

"But, holy shit!" Rain protested, pointing emphatically.

"I agree with Rain," Ameliah said, peeking her head out of the tunnel's mouth, then looking up. "Holy shit."

"Hmph." Tallheart snorted. He walked forward a few steps into the cavern, then paused, looking back. "I told you it would be like this. It is not my fault you did not believe me."

Rain shook his head, still staring as he moved to join him. The cavern was *enormous*—so enormous that there was no way the ceiling should have been able to hold itself up, and yet, it did. That wasn't what had made Rain.exe crash. It was everything else that was doing that.

Except for a small clearing near where the tunnel came out, the cave was full of gigantic trees—not quite redwood size, but close. They had deeply craggy bark like hardened lava, with slate-gray leaves that formed a dense canopy. The floor was dirt, not stone, sparsely carpeted with dark vegetation that became an impassible-looking tangle at the clearing's edge.

The walls and the part of the ceiling that Rain could see blazed with light. The stone was covered with ropes of a crimson substance that was almost too brilliant to look at directly. It wasn't lava—the color was too deep a red. If anything, it seemed alive. Organic. The stuff, whatever it was, was pulsating with a slow, fiery heartbeat. Waves of light traveled along the network, starting from the ground and climbing up the walls, splitting and joining endlessly in a complex, irregular web.

As if what he was seeing wasn't shocking enough, the Ashen Jungle—as Rain decided to call the biome in that moment—was also alive with sound. He could hear the chirping of birds, the croaking of frogs, and a deep, underlying hum that must have been insects. As he continued gawping, there was a rustling sound, then a crunch as something large moved within the trees.

"Holy shit," Rain said for the fourth time.

He used Detection, scanning for monsters. The same signal he'd felt before was still there, though not in the direction from which the noise had come. There was another signal as well, further away off to the left. It, too, couldn't have been the source.

Rain pinged again, for animals this time, then stumbled.

"Are you okay?" Ameliah asked, quickly steadying him. Her words came through as a sequence of numbers of various colors and hues. "What did you sense? Did we stumble into a lair when I wasn't paying attention?"

"No," Tallheart said as Rain struggled to recover from the crippling synesthesia. "It is a Heat biome. From the smell, perhaps Chemical as well. Hmm. It is unusually robust."

"You don't say," Rain said thickly, managing to regain his equilibrium. "I'm fine. Detection was just...overwhelming. I shouldn't have used full power. There are animals *everywhere*. I don't—" He shook his head.

His armor was starting to feel cold, the Thermal Regulation enchantment fighting back against the heat. Beads of sweat had broken out across his unprotected forehead. His resistances only prevented damage; they didn't make things feel comfortable.

Ameliah frowned, releasing Rain now that it was clear he wasn't going to keel over. "I was expecting burning mushrooms or something. Maybe some moss. Not...this." She gestured vaguely.

"Mmm," Tallheart said, pointing at the glowing webbing. "Your moss is there. Common Fire Moss. It mirrors the sun during the day and will darken at night."

"Hold up," Rain said, raising a hand. "How does it know what time it is without the sun?"

Tallheart looked at him. "How do you?"

Rain glanced at the clock hovering in the corner of his eye as a part of his HUD. *Point.*

"How are we going to get through?" Ameliah asked.

Rain shook his head, at a loss. *How is something like this even possible? Fire monsters, sure, but animals? And the trees...do they photosynthesize using the light from the moss? No, that just moves the problem. Where is the moss getting its energy from? From the ground, clearly, but enough to glow like that? How did it even get here? Does it just grow spontaneously like that toxic shit in Fel Sadanis? I suppose it must, but then, does that mean the animals spawned like mon—*

"Rain!" Ameliah shouted.

"Huh?" Rain said dumbly, tearing his eyes away from the moss to look at her.

"I asked what rank it is," Ameliah said.

"Oh," Rain said, wincing. *Oops. I got fascinated. Must have failed a save.* He raised his shield, checking the depth gauge which he'd strapped to its back along with a few other items he wanted close at hand. "Rank fifteen."

"Hmm," Ameliah said to herself. "I should probably change my build. I could power through, but that wouldn't be efficient. Changing skills is such a pain, though. I need to think about—  
Look out!"

Rain's gasped, having seen the same thing—an orange flash, deep within the trees. A hissing sizzle reached Rain's ears as an enormous ropey spray of *lava* blasted through the foliage, coming straight for them.

Reflexively, Rain turned, raising his shield. The lava slammed into him with enough force to push him back, though he kept his footing. The heat was more intense than anything he had ever experienced, but he felt no pain thanks to his resistance. Moments later, he realized that the lava was evaporating into orange light.

*It's a spell! My armor is absorbing the mana!* His eyes flicked to his HUD, seeing that his shield's saturation had jumped by over three thousand points. *Oh shit! Ameliah!*

Rain turned his head, seeing her with her arms crossed in front of her face. Her clothes were burning, ignited by the molten rock that covered her. Before Rain could even think to activate Refrigerate, Ameliah uncrossed her arms, pointing one of them in the direction of the attack.

"Haa!"

A ball of fire expanded in front of Ameliah's outstretched palm, growing to the size of a basketball and looking like nothing more than a miniature sun wreathed in flame. With barely any delay, it flew toward the tree line, leaving a trail of fire through the air in its wake. The missile struck one of the trunks, then *exploded*.

The force of the detonation rattled Rain's teeth, light shining around his shield as his shadow was cast long into the tunnel behind them.

Ameliah wasn't done. A second orb followed the first, only a second later, detonating like the first with deafening force.

***Refrigerate!***

Rain's mind finally clicked into gear. The lava coating Ameliah had already begun to harden and flake away, revealing less damage to her clothing than Rain had expected. Refrigerate hastened the process, and within a second, Ameliah was free of it, singed, but seemingly unharmed.

"There you are," she said, stepping forward. "Let's see if you can resist this."

Rain dropped Refrigerate, staring at her as *three fiery* spheres appeared, orbiting her wrist like planets of fire.

*TriPLICATE Casting?*

The orbs didn't launch immediately upon reaching basketball size; instead, they kept growing, the flames raging ever brighter with unstable energy. Then, Ameliah began to chant. Orange light flickered in her eyes, not all of it reflected from the spell at her fingertips.

"Tryim mi-gon, fyr ji-hen! Tryim mi-gon, fyr ji-hen! Tryim mi-gon, fyr ji-hen!"

Rain dropped to a knee, cowering behind his shield like it was the wooden desk meant to protect him from an atomic blast. *TriPLICATE Casting, Overcharge, AND Chanting!?! Oh, shit!*

Fireball—for that was obviously what the base spell was, though he'd never seen one before—did one part Force damage for every two parts Heat. It wasn't just a scaled-up Firebolt; it was the magical version of a rocket-propelled grenade. With all of Ameliah's metamagic, it would actually be more like a cruise missile—and she had just launched three of them.

The blast, when it came a heartbeat later, was *beyond* devastating. Too late, Rain realized that he'd forgotten to lower his visor. He couldn't see the impact from behind his shield, but the

wind alone was almost enough to flatten him. Had he been standing, he would have been knocked off his feet.

Your party has defeated [Mottled Magma Frog], Level 17  
Your Contribution: 5%  
0 Experience Earned

There was a crash of a falling tree and the patter of falling dirt, then silence, save for the ringing in Rain's ears.

He looked up at Ameliah wordlessly, still hiding behind his shield.

"Are you okay?" she asked, frowning at him.

Rain nodded numbly, lowering his shield and letting himself sprawl into a sitting position.

"Tallheart?" Ameliah asked, looking over Rain's head.

"Hmph," Tallheart said dismissively. "I am undamaged."

"Right. Silly of me to ask." Ameliah sighed, rubbing at her temples. She looked down at her burned clothing. "Tsk, I liked this shirt. I should have used Shrouded by Flame, not just Brace. I haven't fully reacclimated to this build yet."

Rain almost missed her words, having been distracted by the blast site. It really did look like there'd been an airstrike. There was a crater and everything. The undergrowth had been uprooted and blasted away, though amazingly, it wasn't all on fire. Some of it was smoldering, but the flames quickly died away as he watched. Only one of the enormous trees had fallen.



As extreme as the damage was, Rain had honestly been expecting much worse based on the force he'd experienced.

*Is this the strength of the depths? I know some stuff is supposed to get stronger, but the plants too? If you can have deepstone, can you have deepwood? Deepdirt?*

"Close your mouth," Ameliah said. "You look like a fish."

Rain closed his mouth.

Ameliah sighed, then surprised Rain by using his shoulder for support as she lowered herself to sit next to him. She nodded toward the crater. "Why are you so shocked? I mean, sure, Fire Mage is showy, but you said you did the math."

"I did, but..." Rain shook his head.

Ameliah was level 31, and as a Jack derivative, that meant she had 63 Focus. She was also using all five accolades of the Blackfoot Trench, which gave her a combined +10 to all stats. That worked better for her than pure Focus accolades would have, as the 2.6x multiplier from her legendary class only counted for attribute boosts that were evenly matched. With it applied, her stat totals at the moment were 189.8 across the board.

Fireball was a tier-two AOE spell with an average base damage of 25, increasing to 250 at rank ten. It had 0.75% Focus scaling, which brought the base damage of the spell up to 605.875.

Fire Affinity tripled it—both the Heat and Force damage, because of reasons. Fire Synergy, on the other hand, was similar to Aura Synergy, applying to active Fire-keyword spells in the

same way. Ameliah had 6 of those in her build right now, all rank 10, so it was another 1.6x. With both passives applied, a single Fireball would deal 2,908.2 damage.

Overcharge tripled that, then Triplicate Casting tripled *that*, and then Chanting tripled *THAT*, bringing the total damage up to 78,521.4—enough to one-shot Rain, even with his accolades and fancy armor, maybe even twice over.

Rain shook his head, still staring at the crater. *And that's just Fireball, too. One of those six Fire skills she's got? Yeah. Meteor. Tier 4. How in the name of this world's dubious gods did she ever lose to the Crimson Swords? Her build aside, the damage limit must have screwed her over. She'd only have needed one good hit to—*

Ameliah nudged his shoulder with hers. "Rain, if you're done staring into space, would you mind refilling my mana?"

Rain blinked, looking at her. He hadn't missed the strained note in her voice, so he shook his head. "That's not a good idea." *Fireball isn't cheap, and the mods add up. The mana cost for that strike wouldn't have been too crazy, but...*

Ameliah closed her eyes as she rubbed at her neck. "I'm fine. It's just a little headache."

"Liar," Rain said. "That's what you said an hour ago." *She wouldn't have sat down if she was fine.* He looked back at the jungle, actively pinging with Detection rather than leaving it to his macros. Sound was starting to return as the animals recovered from the shock of the explosion.

Rain frowned as his sweep returned several monster echoes, not just the one from before. *Animals run away; monsters run toward. If that saying is true, why haven't they attacked yet?* He

turned to tell Ameliah about what he'd sensed, but she was already pointing toward the trees, another Fireball forming at her fingertips.

"More coming," she said with a grimace as she struggled to rise.

Tallheart stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. "Wait."

Ameliah glanced up at him, not dismissing the Fireball. Rain could feel the heat rolling off of it, his armor working overtime to keep him cool.

Tallheart rumbled disapprovingly. "Do not strike unless they do. It is day. Their instincts will keep them within the shelter of the trees."

"You're sure about that?" Ameliah asked.

"I am sure," Tallheart said.

Ameliah nodded, closing her fist. The Fireball winked out of existence, leaving a glowing afterimage in Rain's vision. Tallheart nodded slowly, removing his hand from her shoulder.

Ameliah watched the edge of the jungle for a few moments more, then got to her feet unsteadily, refusing Tallheart's assistance when he offered it to her. She ran her hands through her hair, looking down at Rain. "Okay. Give me some mana. We'll lure them out one at a time."

Rain opened his mouth to reply, but Tallheart cut him off.

"No. We should retreat to the <something> passage to rest."

"The what passage?" Ameliah asked.

"<Something>," Tallheart said, offering Rain his hand and pulling him effortlessly to his feet.

"It means in-between."

"Huh," Rain said, dusting himself off.

*How about...liminal. Sure, let's go with that. Man, it's been a while since that's happened. At least Ameliah didn't know the word either. That makes me feel a little better.*

He looked at Tallheart for confirmation. "So there's a liminal space between biomes? Am I pronouncing that right?"

"You are," Tallheart said. "Monsters tend to stay within their own territory during the day unless provoked. The liminal spaces are...safer. Not safe, but safer." He paused, tilting his head. "Usually. Sometimes, there is war."

Rain tilted his head, filing that away under 'questions for later.' He shook his head. "Okay, back to the packs, I guess."

*We should probably have lunch anyway. I'm starving. Seriously, it feels like I'm hollow inside for all that I had three ration bars earlier. I'm not that unbalanced right now, so it has to be something about the accolades.*

"No," Ameliah said firmly. "We should deal with those monsters first. I'm not ready to turn back yet."

"I am," Tallheart said. "I require rest."

*Bullshit*, Rain thought, but he kept it to himself, seeing what Tallheart was doing.

Unfortunately, it seemed that Ameliah did as well.

"Seriously, I'm fine," she said. "If everyone could stop fussing over me, that would be great.

Now come on, Rain. Mana me."

"No," Rain said. "You're pulling a Val."

Ameliah blinked. "You take that back."

"It only stings because it's true," Rain said. "Come on, Ameliah. We're going to be down here for weeks, at least. There's no need to hurt yourself by pushing so hard. You don't have anything to prove. Please. Let's just go have lunch and then come back once we've rested a bit."

Ameliah clenched her jaw silently, then looked away. "Fine." She sighed. "I just wanted... We can't be taking it easy down here. This is the depths. You haven't been an adventurer for long enough to realize how big of a deal that is. We have to make the most of the time we have."

"I'm not arguing that point," Rain said. "I'm just saying this is our first day. We're still figuring stuff out."

A branch snapped in the jungle, and all three of them tensed. Rain spotted a pair of eyes staring at them from within a dark bush, but they vanished moments later with a rustle of foliage.

"Let us have this discussion elsewhere," Tallheart said, turning and heading back up the passage. Rain and Ameliah glanced at each other, then back at the trees, before following.

They made it back to their packs without incident, finding the area still lit by the evertorch Rain had wedged into a crack in the wall. Ameliah sent her Lunar Orb up to hover near the ceiling as Rain struggled to unstrap his shield from his arm. Once he was free of it, he turned immediately to his pack, digging around until he found a pair of large canteens.

"Here," he said, pulling them free and offering them to Tallheart and Ameliah. "One of those is potato, and the other is chicken."

"Hmm," Tallheart said, accepting one of the canteens. "This is...soup? From Jamus?"

"Yup," Rain said, smiling as Ameliah took the other canteen. He turned and dove back into his pack, looking for bowls. "Should we make a fire or something? It will be better warm."

"We don't have any wood," Ameliah said. Rain heard her unscrew the cap of the canteen, then sniff. "Potato. Here, trade."

"Mmm," Tallheart said.

"Wood," Rain said, tossing a log onto the stone floor of the tunnel with a clunk.

Ameliah snorted. "Of course you brought wood. How much do you have in there?"

"Some," Rain said, not looking up. *Damn it, where are those bowls? Everything has shifted. It's all so...disorderly. Damn it.* He sighed, fighting through the sudden need to dump everything out and repack it. *Oh, what I'd give for a bag of holding.*

"We should not waste fuel," Tallheart said. "I doubt trees below will be useful in that regard."

"Yeah," Rain said, finally finding the bowls and pulling them free. He tossed them on the floor with a clatter, then went back in for spoons. "I've been meaning to ask you, Tallheart. How come you can't just make a tuned up heater plate or something for cooking?" Belatedly, he remembered that he could use Detection to help him find the spoons and did so. *Of course they're all the way at the bottom.*

"It is possible, but not efficient," Tallheart said. "Heater plates that are used to warm air require little mana. To make something truly hot requires...hmm...exponentially more. It is the same reason that my smelter uses traditional fuel. It captures heat. It does not create it." He hummed to himself as if coming to some decision. "I will make something tonight. We will have plenty of Crysts by then, and mana is not a concern with you around."

"It's handy having a Dynamo, isn't it?" Rain said, holding aloft a pair of spoons in victory. He passed one of them to Tallheart, then another to Ameliah, debating whether he wanted to bother trying to retrieve a third for himself. He wasn't exactly planning on using it.

"Here," Ameliah said, offering him a steaming bowl of soup.

"How...?" Rain asked, looking at her. He could feel himself start to salivate as the delicious aroma reached his nostrils.

"It's handy having a Fire Mage, isn't it?" Ameliah said, smiling.

Rain chuckled, accepting the bowl. "I suppose it is. How did you do that without making a soup explosion, though? 'Heat Soup' isn't a spell as far as I'm aware."

"The same way I can summon a Firebolt without launching it," Ameliah said around a spoonful of soup. "Practice." She swallowed, then tapped her spoon against the side of the canteen with a clink. "When metal saturates with Heat mana, it gets hot. A few seconds was all it took. The trick is not melting through."

"Ah," Rain said, taking a deep breath. He set down his empty bowl, then reached for the canteen.

"Did you even chew?" Tallheart asked.

Rain snorted. "It's soup. You don't chew soup."

"The accolades are really having an effect, aren't they?" Ameliah said. "I can feel it too. I just took them off, and I feel like I've improved for the first time in years. The hunger must be a side effect."

"Oh?" Rain asked excitedly. "How much progress have you made?"

"You know my interface doesn't work like that," Ameliah said with a shrug. "I can still tell, all the same. It's pretty amazing. I could do without the headache, though." She sighed, closing her eyes. "You were right. I was pushing too hard. Ever since we came down here, it's just... Sorry. I was only trying to protect you, but you're not as fragile as you used to be. It's just going to take me a while to get used to."

"It's fine," Rain said, smiling. "After what you did to that frog, I'm feeling pretty damn fragile."



"Mmm," Tallheart said with a satisfied rumble that had nothing to do with the conversation. "I must remember to thank Jamus when we return. This is delicious."

Rain nodded in agreement. "If you don't mind my asking, how did you and Snowlilly get by down here, anyway? Did you bring food from the surface or what? Plant monsters aren't all that common as far as I've seen."

"We brought what we could, but mostly, we made do without," Tallheart said, frowning. "Cervidians can survive for months without food."

"So can humans," Ameliah said, gesturing with her spoon. "That doesn't mean we enjoy it."

"Mmm," Tallheart rumbled in agreement. "Water was the real problem. Hmm. I do not know how much Rain has brought, but once we find an Arcane Cryst, I will need to make a filter." He tilted his head. "Unless... Will Purify work?"

"Will it work on what?" Rain asked. "Like filthy cave water, or..."

"Blood," Tallheart said, taking another spoonful of soup. "Hmm. Unfortunately, I cannot consume it directly without...unpleasant complications. Monsters are a good source of resources, even if it requires some effort to extract them."

Rain stared at Tallheart in horror, picturing the antlered man with vampire fangs and blood running down his chin. It was a striking image, particularly because cervidian canines were less pronounced than human ones. "You say that like you've tried it."

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "I have. Lilly and I were desperate. It was long ago, before I learned to make filters for nonmetallic materials."

Rain set down his empty bowl, slightly queasy at the prospect of a third refill given what he'd just heard. "Tallheart, have I mentioned how unreasonably metal you are?"

"You did so when I told you the name of my class," Tallheart said mildly.

"And I stand by it," Rain said. "Runic Powersmith? I mean, come on. I need to find a luthier, teach them the difference between a lute and a *guitar*, figure out how to make a pickup, an amp, and a distortion pedal, and then learn to play so I can teach you what Iron Maiden sounds like. You'd love it."

Tallheart rumbled noncommittally.

Rain chuckled, then looked at Ameliah. "Are you ready to tell me what your class name is yet?" She froze, her spoon halfway to her mouth, and Rain quickly raised his hands. "You don't have to. I'm just curious."

"Fine," she said with a sigh, lowering her spoon. She looked from him to Tallheart. "But you both need to promise that you'll never tell anyone."

"Of course we won't," Rain said. "Right, Tallheart?"

"Mmm," Tallheart said.

"Okay..." Ameliah said, looking away. "It's...uh...just a little embarrassing." She looked back at Rain, blushing in the pale light. "Uncertain Savior."

Rain blinked, then grinned wide. "You're right. That *is* embarrassing."

"Says the Night Cleaner," she said, punching him in the shoulder. "Shut up. I didn't get to pick it."

"Hah, sorry," Rain said, still smiling as he raised his hand to where hers had deflected off his armor. "I actually kinda like it. It fits you."

"I know," Ameliah said. "That just makes it worse."

Rain shook his head. "No, it doesn't make it worse. It's really cool. Not as cool as Runic Powersmith—because honestly—but still. I bet I'm going to get something dumb, like 'Auric Mana Furnace'." He chuckled. "What trees did you have when you picked it? It seems more related to your base class than anything else."

"I don't remember, and I doubt it had anything to do with it," Ameliah said, setting down her bowl. "Jacks don't get specializations. You know that." She let her head fall into her hands, rubbing at her temples again.

Rain frowned, watching her. "Is the headache getting any better?"

"No," she said with a sigh. She reached for the canteen to pour herself some more soup.

Rain nodded, his own eternal headache throbbing in sympathetic pain. He was used to it, though, and his judgment when it came to discomfort was shot. Ameliah's wasn't. "You should lie down for a bit."

"I—" Ameliah began, looking up. She stopped when she saw his concerned expression, then sighed deeply. "Okay. Just a few hours."

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "I will sleep as well."

Rain blinked, looking at him. He smiled. "And leave me on watch alone?"

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "As I said, the liminal space is safe enough during the day. Once the night falls, that will change. We should explore the jungle before then." He scratched at the base of one of his antlers. "You cannot keep watch at night, Rain, but you may keep watch now."

"I still don't see why I can't help—" Rain started, but Tallheart shook his head.

"We have discussed this. It is not that I do not trust you; it is that you are soft and weak. Like dough."

Ameliah choked, spluttering as she almost spat the last of her soup out across the floor.

"Why, thank you for that brutal honesty, Tallheart," Rain said.

"Mmm," Tallheart said, busy refilling his own bowl. "You are welcome."