

216: Seeking

Ameliah took one last look through the contents of her pack before tying down the weather flap and settling it across her shoulders. Once it was in place, she adjusted the straps, tightening them until the small bag was held as tightly as possible to her back.

"You're sure you don't want to bring your cloak?" Samson asked, holding the folded garment out to her, the two of them presently standing just outside the Yelfenn Guildhall.

"Too much drag." Ameliah glanced up at the heavily overcast sky, then shook her head. "If it rains, it rains."

"I guess this is it, then," Samson said, tucking the cloak under his arm and offering her his hand. "Good luck."

"And to you," Ameliah said, gripping it firmly. "I'll be back before you know it."

"We'll be ready for you," Samson said. He released her, then took a step back.

Twisting her torso from side to side, Ameliah hopped up onto her toes, bouncing lightly. Her pack stayed where it was.

Satisfied, she smiled, then summoned her helmet. Giving Samson a friendly wave, she turned away and set off at a light jog, weaving her way through the light traffic of Yelfenn gentry with their silly saddle-shaped hats. Those became less common as she neared the gate, the streets growing crowded with dirty people with hollow expressions.

Ameliah hardened her heart. There was little she could do for the refugees that the people of Yelfenn weren't already doing, offering their neighbors shelter and the safety of their walls—safety that was a lie. Walls would be worth nothing should Val's father decide to sear a second city off the map.

One problem at a time.

Passing through the useless fortifications, Ameliah set off on the south road. As the traffic died away, her jog became a run, then her run, a bounding sprint, each powerful stride carrying her further than the last. It was a long way to Elfield—about two hundred and fifty kilometers, slightly more than the distance between Fel Sadanis and Vestvall. She'd done that in the space of an hour, but that had been with Airwalk and all of her strength. There was no need for such haste here, especially since it ran the risk of attracting *attention*.

Pushing aside a pang of worry for the others, Ameliah focused on her skills, letting her body guide itself. She reached within, and her abilities unfurled within her mind, less as words and more as simple *knowing*. Each felt to her as a treasured stone in a pouch, familiar from long keeping, yet out of reach, the pouch tied firmly shut.

Heavy Armor

Thickened Plate 10

Deep Plate 10

Heavy Armor Inventory 10

Mana Vent 10

Living Armor 10

Equipment Mastery

Deep Durability 10

Empowered Mainhand 10

Empowered Offhand 10
Empowered Amulet 10
Empowered Armor 10
Empowered Rings 20 (10+10)
Equipment Mastery 20 (10+10)

Sharpshooting

Drilling Shot 10
Seeker Shot 10
Sharpened Arrowheads 10
Strong Draw 10
Piercing Shot 10
Endless Quiver 10
Sniper Shot 10
Bleeder Shot 10
Multishot 10
Stacked Shot 10

Restoration

Healing Word 10

Physicality

Airwalk 10

Hurling

Unerring Throw 6
Missile Recall 10
Ranged Arsenal 8

Psionics

Message 10

Utility Auras

Purify 10
Energy Well 10

Magical Utility

Channel Mastery 10
Mana Manipulation 10

She sharpened her focus further, mental fingers worrying a knot. She'd already made one change yesterday, taking Purify not long after arriving in the city. She hadn't bothered with more than that, busy helping Samson and the others get set up. Now, with nothing but hours of running ahead of her, she had more than enough time.

The kilometers fell away in a blur. Ameliah passed farmers with their donkeys, plodding trader caravans, and occasional merchants with journey carts. A brash mail courier even tried to race her at one point, kicking his horse to a gallop. Credit to the animal, it managed to pace her for over two minutes before it began to flag.

Not long after the pair fell away, she finally felt her skills come loose. Slowing so as to not trip over her own feet, she reached inward and traded Missile Recall for Efficient Movement. The Physicality skill nestled amongst her others with the familiarity of an old friend, and she triggered it immediately. In response, her muscles loosened, her steps becoming even surer than they'd already been—effortless, even, with no wasted motion.

Ameliah sighed, closing her eyes for as long as she dared.

I've missed this.

Strictly speaking, Efficient Movement wasn't necessary. Even without Energy Well to restore her, her stats were more than sufficient. Excessive, really, giving her more stamina than she could use with her current build, even if she put her mind to it. That said, it was always best to preserve your resources when you didn't know what was ahead of you.

Also, it felt good.

Before Ameliah could lose herself in the simple pleasure of perfect motion, she brought her mind back to her skills.

Unerring Throw would be the next to go, she decided. Removing skills unfinished sucked, but like Missile Recall, its purpose as a prerequisite had already been served. Really, she should have gotten rid of it days ago.

Several villages came and went before the skill finally came free, and when it did, she replaced it with Summer.

On their way to the ice cream vendor, Rain had filled her in on Unity and what it did. Though overexcited as usual, he was right to be, in her judgment. The spell would be an astounding benefit to Ascension. What he hadn't seemed to realize—or perhaps had realized but hadn't wanted to bring up—was that while he was locked out until he found a blue, there was nothing stopping *her*.

Ameliah smiled, then activated the aura, boosting it with Channel Mastery. At rank one, she couldn't even feel it, really, but that would change in due time.

No, there's no way he didn't realize I could take it. He just didn't want to pressure me into tying myself even more tightly to Ascension. Unity would definitely do that, but it's not like I'm ever planning on leaving anyway, so I don't actually care.

She paused, then smiled, finding that it was actually true.

What will Rain do when I tell him, though? Will he be jealous I took his skill?

She chuckled.

No, definitely not. Not Rain. He'll just run in an excited circle, waving his arms around and jabbering about numbers and synergy.

Ameliah let herself slow to a stop, covering her face as she pictured the scene. After a moment, she walked off the road to a hill that would have been the perfect backdrop for a painting if not for the dreary sky. Untangling herself from her pack, she crunched her way through a Guild ration, washing the last bits of gravel down with a swig of water. Her stat balance mitigated the appetite issues awakened were infamous for, but she'd still been running for two straight hours already. She hadn't been ravenous or anything, but there was no need to be hungry when she didn't have to be. She'd had enough of that for two lifetimes.

On the subject of discomfort, she also decided it was time to remove one of her three stat rings.

She had four of them, technically, each boosting all stats by fifty, but the last of them was in her pouch. Four rings, times fifty points, times three for Empowered Rings, was six hundred points to each primary attribute. That in itself wasn't a problem, but it added up. Six attributes made for a total stat boost of thirty-six hundred, which was well above her tolerance, and indeed, above the maximum tolerance for her level. She'd tried on all four anyway, not long after Tallheart had upgraded them, and Rain's description of 'bone fire' was exactly right. Even three rings was pushing it, and while her tolerance was improving day by day, all this running had her feeling a bit *stretched*.

Twisting to detach one of her gauntlet's fingers, she slipped off a ring, then shuddered as overhealth, overstamina, and overmana rushed through her. Her body tingled with

overwhelming energy, making her feel ready and raring to wrestle a Hababa or something. Thankfully, that questionable urge faded as quickly as it had come, leaving her as refreshed as if she'd just had a full night's sleep.

"Whew," she said to no one in particular.

Smiling, she bounced the ring on her palm, then glanced around at the landscape before dismissing her breastplate. Her armor didn't have thigh compartments like Rain's, given that anything in them would have tumbled to the floor should she dismiss her cuisses. Thus, she'd taken to wearing a small pouch around her neck beneath her Forceweave, which she extracted now. Uncinching the string, she slipped the ring inside to join its twin and Rain's Detection anchor. She smiled, caressing the misshapen purple gem with a finger before tying the pouch closed again and tucking it away against her heart.

No range. And he says his class isn't broken.

Resummoning her breastplate and refreshing Efficient Movement, Ameliah resumed her sprint southward. Break time was over, so she began concentrating on her skills again. Being a Jack could be incredibly tedious, sometimes.

The land soon grew rocky, a mountain range coming into view to her left as she raced over hill and dale. After a few more villages, each larger than the last, something greater-still came into sight.

Elfield wasn't a big city, its growth stunted by the lack of a teleport platform, but it was still impressive in its way, surrounded by a wall of white granite with taller stone buildings rising within. She'd been here once before, having responded to a posting in Halfstone. A

particularly problematic monster had appeared in a deep mine to the east, and the local adventurers hadn't been enough to deal with it.

Elfield was a bronze city, through and through. It didn't even have a delving.

Growing nearer, Ameliah was forced to slow to a jog in response to the traffic and the alarmed looks she was getting. Adventurers running from city to city wasn't *that* uncommon of a sight, but most didn't do it in platemail.

After flashing her Guild plate to the wall guards, Ameliah dropped Summer, recalling from her last visit that magic was expressly prohibited in Elfield without license from El's Chosen. Even with the Citizen missing, she wasn't about to borrow trouble. The last thing she needed was a crazy pack of zealots after her.

The northern plaza appeared to be some type of market, dominated by a marble statue of El at the center, which went without saying if you knew anything about this city. She hadn't come through this gate last time, though, so she stopped to get directions from a street vendor, resisting the woman's attempts to sell her the entire contents of her wagon. As she subsequently made her way south, the buildings grew taller and taller until memory clicked and she found herself outside the Guild.

Entering the small yet well-maintained stone building, Ameliah looked around, finding it unchanged since her last visit. The looks she was getting from the handful of occupants were new, though. Her plate was in her belt pouch, but her armor was more than enough to draw every eye as she walked to the quest window.

She found it staffed by the branch leader, whom she remembered as actually being a decent person despite the other allegiance he held. He was an elderly man, entirely bald, wearing a green El's Chosen robe below the bronze Guild plate that dangled from his neck. He also had no legs. She couldn't see that at the moment, not from this side of the counter, but she recalled her shock upon realizing he was missing them from the last time. She hadn't asked him how it had happened then, and she wasn't about to now.

"Blessings of El upon you, and be welcome," the man said, straightening in his seat as she approached.

"And upon you," Ameliah said, then dismissed her helmet.

Mild surprise crossed the branch leader's face before his brow furrowed, only for his wispy eyebrows to shoot up a moment later. "I remember you! Weren't you the one who dealt with the Gripper a few years back?"

"Yeah, that was me," Ameliah said with a polite smile, ignoring the sudden outbreak of excited muttering behind her.

"Be doubly welcome, then!" the branch leader said, smiling and spreading his arms wide. "It is so rare for a silver to visit us, let alone for the same silver more than once! Especially after having experienced such good fortune! I do not remember you being quite so armored the last time, so you have my congratulations. However, I must also apologize, for fear I have forgotten your name."

"Ameliah," Ameliah said, busy unstrapping her pack. "Don't feel bad. I forgot yours too."

"Haneish," the Guild leader said, inclining his head. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance. What brings you here, if I might ask? If you are looking for more work, you will be disappointed." He gestured to the posting-covered board beside him. "I don't have anything worthy of your time. It has been peaceful in this corner of El's Garden, though I fear for the rest of it."

"That's alright, and yeah, it's wild out there," Ameliah said, having finally extracted a small paper-wrapped package from her pack. "I'm just passing through. Got a delivery here from Yelfenn. You wouldn't have anything for Woodmarsh, would you?"

"I do not believe so, but I will check after I record your credit," Haneish said, sliding the package across the counter. He accepted the original posting and her plate as she passed them to him next, then froze. "This was posted in Yelfenn this morning." He blinked up at her. "To be completed within a month. There is no bonus listed for express delivery."

"I was passing through anyway, like I said," Ameliah replied with a shrug, placing her pack down on the counter.

"Lucky for the receiver, then," Haneish said, setting her plate aside and counting five Tel out onto the counter. "I'll send a runner to let them know that their order has arrived *significantly* ahead of schedule."

Smiling, Ameliah dug through her pack, emerging with a folded sheet of blue paper. "Could you post this too, please?"

"Certainly," Haneish said, rummaging beneath the counter to emerge with a Guild ledger. "It's five copper for a month-long posting, plus any rewards you wish to offer for your task, plus a percentage thereof depending upon the category."

"That's fine. No reward for this one. It's less a task and more an advertisement." Sweeping up the money, she placed the paper on the counter with one of the Tel atop it, then tucked the rest into her pouch. "Please post it for as long as this gets me."

"Very well," Haneish said, busy copying her plate number into the ledger. Looking up from the book, he passed her plate back to her, then did a little hop in his chair, turning himself to face the board. "Woodmarsh, Woodmarsh, let's see..." He gripped the back of his chair with one hand, hoisting himself into the air with no apparent effort and balancing there. Ameliah noted that his robe had been tailored for his particular situation, folded and fastened at the bottom with a pair of golden toggles worked like spears.

After a moment spent reading the postings at the top of the board, Haneish shook his head. "No, I'm afraid I don't have anything out that way."

"Oh well," Ameliah said with a shrug, slipping her pack back on and tightening the straps. "I know you said it was quiet, but any interesting news? Empire movements, plate hunters at large, strange travelers passing through? Citizen sightings, maybe?"

Haneish grunted, settling back into his chair. "No Citizen sightings. There is a new rumor about them, which I'm sure you've already heard. A team called Ascension in Barstone apparently witnessed the Warden taking control of the Citizens' link—taking control of their *minds*." He shuddered. "Terrifying."

"It's true," Ameliah confirmed, grimacing in full agreement. "I was there."

"Come again?" Haneish said, his hand frozen above the blue paper.

"I was there," Ameliah repeated. "I'm actually an Ascension member, though it isn't a Guild team. You'll find it listed in the ledgers after the next sync, but we only registered it so we could take group quests."

"I see..." Haneish said uncertainly.

Ameliah just smiled, hardly able to blame him for doubting her. Adventurers were always spinning their own truth to make themselves seem more important than they were. Antsy to be on her way again, she summoned her helmet. "Anyway, sorry, but I've got places to be. You seem to have a pretty good thing going here, so I doubt you're interested, but you might want to read this when you post it." She tapped a finger on the blue sheet. "We need people with experience."

She turned, waving a hand over her shoulder. "See you around, Haneish."

She turned for the door, ignoring all the bronzeplates suddenly pretending they hadn't been eavesdropping. Emerging into the street, she looked up at the gray sky and clicked her tongue before turning west, resigned to getting drenched. She left the city without incident, and before long, farms and fields gave way to trees, though the traffic on the road forced her to moderate her speed. It was busier than the road north, the stone-filled wagons going to the same place she was.

Thus, she had more than enough time to free another skill, which she did, swapping Living Armor for Amplify Aura. Trading a tier-four for a tier-one hurt even more than giving up an unfinished skill. Really, though, the Heavy Armor capstone was as useless to her as the Hurling prerequisites. It would surely be useful on her next delve, but on the surface, all it did was drain her stamina.

By the time noon rolled around—though you wouldn't know it, looking at the sky—another city sprawled before her. Woodmarsh wasn't a Citizen-city, but it was still at least as big as Fel Sadanis. The stone quarried in Elfield came through here, flowing through its harbor on the deep and placid North River. With the river trade came adventurer traffic—bronzeplates, mostly, working as hired guards for merchant ships or simply passing through on business of their own. Thus, the Woodmarsh Guild was actually larger than the one in Elfield, though when Ameliah found the building, she noted it was in significantly worse repair.

After arranging for another posting with an unpleasantly obsequious clerk, she left again, headed to the docks. There, she found a quiet tavern and purchased a hot meal of beef and barley, which she happily devoured before Airwalking her way across the river. The idea of finding a room had crossed her mind but had been immediately dismissed. She wasn't going to waste half a day just to avoid getting wet.

The far bank of the North River played host to a small lumber camp south of her, but that was it, most people having no reason to cross. There was an isolated village even further south, supposedly, but she had no need to visit the hunters and trappers that lived there. Instead, she turned north, looking for a particular rocky outcropping along the shore.

She found it in short order, any uncertainty about whether it was the right one vanishing as she inspected its base and found the tiny lily that had been scratched into the dark stone.

Standing beside it and placing the river to her right, she took one quarter-turn westward, then strode confidently into the trees.

To keep her bearing, she used an old trick her father had taught her for days when the sun was being shy. Choosing a tree directly ahead of her, she visualized a straight line running from herself, through the tree, to the next tree beyond. Upon passing the first, she repeated the process with the second, so on and so forth making her way off the edge of the map.

This forest hadn't seen a surveyor in generations, she was sure. The 'least shit' map, for example, showed clear land with a number of tiny lakes in this direction, lakes Tallheart said the forest had swallowed long ago. She could believe it, the trees growing taller and the silence deeper by the minute. Finally, as she was beginning to fear her trick had failed her, she spotted the low stone wall that was her next waypoint. How old it was, she couldn't even guess. It was all overgrown with moss, the mortar having long since crumbled away, leaving nothing but tumbled stones to mark what might have been the boundary of some long-dead shepherd's field. If there'd been a settlement here, it had fallen to the forest before her father, or his father, or his father's father had even been born.

At the end of the wall was a boulder, and Ameliah knelt to inspect the lily symbol carved into it. There was also a helpful arrow pointing due north, but instead of following said pointer, she used it as a guide to align herself, heading precisely northwest until she found the mouth of the correct valley. Sure of the path again, and with the valley to guide her, she increased her speed to a sprint, relying on Efficient Movement to help her slip through the trees. The forest felt truly ancient now, with towering trunks and little in the way of underbrush.

She ran for hours, taking the opportunity to unlock her skills again, though she didn't swap anything just yet. Despite her class's name, Uncertain Savior hated it when she did that and

would punish her with a progressively worsening headache the longer she persisted. For a few hours, though, the sheer versatility of being able to swap a skill at a moment's notice would be worth it.

At the end of the valley as the sun was setting—not that she could see it—she found another marked stone outcrop, suspiciously cleaned of moss and bearing the lily as clear as day. It was here that she would have been meant to camp until someone came for her had she actually been seeking refuge. However, there was no telling when that would be, nor guarantee she'd be approached unless she pretended to be something she was not. Fortunately, she had other options.

Starting from the marked stone, she began moving in an ever-expanding spiral, searching for tracks. By the time she found the clear imprint of a boot in a patch of dried mud, her head was pounding, and the light was beginning to fade. "Oh, thank Dozer," she said with a relieved sigh, chuckling at herself as she traded Amplify Aura for Follow Trail. Another half-hour and she'd have needed Lunar Orb just to see the ground. Follow Trail was useless without a trail to follow.

Dismissing her helmet and massaging her temples, she started concentrating again. She'd need light soon regardless, even with the Tracking skill guiding her senses, and she hadn't bothered to bring an evertorch or a flashlight. Deciding it would be wiser to wait out the time rather than risk losing the trail, she sat by the boot print and dug out something to eat.

Two hours later, with a pale orb bobbing obediently behind her and thunder rumbling in the distance, Ameliah began seeing clear signs of habitation. Nestled beneath the trees, fenced-off plots of mushrooms began popping up here and there, as well as orderly rows of reedy plants she didn't have a name for. She also started to feel like she was being watched, the hair

on the back of her neck rising, though she saw no one. The smell of wood fires told her she was close, but rather than call out and risk a panic, she continued in silence, her unease steadily growing. Before long, she found out why.

"No..." she gasped, falling to her knees. She sent her light ahead, wishing she couldn't see what it was showing her. The woodsmoke was not that of campfires or hearths, but of devastation. The houses were burned, many of them fallen in on themselves. The hope that the village had fallen to a mere fire died as her light revealed a dark stain in the middle of the street. Blood.

Ameliah dismissed her helmet, fighting back a strangled sob as she looked for bodies, finding none. *How long—?*

The crunch of a boot on gravel made her whirl back to her feet, her bow appearing in her hands as the sensation of being watched took on a much more serious implication. A tall shadowy figure stood at the edge of the trees, the silhouette of a bow held in one hand.

"You are not her," a voice said. It was male, but not nearly so deep as Tallheart's. A teenager's voice, maybe.

"No," Ameliah said, lowering her own bow, then dismissing it completely. "No, I'm not, but I'm a friend." She recalled her light, its pale light washing over the shadowy figure as she sent it high above her head. She'd been right. It was just a kid, though unreasonably tall and lean, and with two tiny nubs on his forehead.

"Human!?" the cervidian gasped, taking a step back and bringing his bow up.

"I'm a *friend*," Ameliah stressed in a desperate rush, bowing at the waist. "Tallheart's friend. Please, don't—" She stopped, rising to see that instead of running, he was stalking toward her.

The cervidian said nothing as he came to a stop. His face was a mask, unreadable as he stared down into her eyes. Despite being even taller than Tallheart, he couldn't be older than sixteen.

Ameliah felt her heart breaking.

After what felt like an eternity, the cervidian let his bow fall to his side. He raised his other hand, and Ameliah held perfectly still as he brushed a tear from her cheek, taking his fingers away to stare at them. "You weep for us?" he asked, hate and disbelief mixing in his voice. "What good are your tears?"

"What happened here?" Ameliah choked.

"What does it look like happened?" the cervidian snapped, his mask breaking as his eyes ignited with rage. He closed them after a moment, clenching his jaw and exhaling through his teeth as he let his hand fall. The anger was gone when he spoke again, leaving only resignation and despair. "Humans happened."

Not looking at her, he turned, trudging away toward the trees. Thunder rumbled in the distance. The distant rush of rain grew louder, and a cold droplet joined the warm ones already streaming down Ameliah's face.

Wordlessly, she followed.