

## 73: Between a rock and a hard place

Scarlett heard a groan escape from Rosa as the woman slowly raised herself from the ground. Shin seemed to have taken a harder blow than them, but he was also moving.

Scarlett's eyes were locked at the space before them though, where their only means of exit had been closed off.

"H-Hello?" Rosa's voice called out quietly.

Shin grunted. "I'm here," he answered, and Scarlett heard the sound of a stone being pushed aside. "Anyone else?"

"...There is only the three of us," Scarlett said after a moment, turning to the two of them. She conjured a fire in the air so that they could also see in the darkness. "The others are most likely on the opposite side."

Shin pushed himself to his feet, walking over to where his shield had landed on the ground. "I'm guessing whatever happened was because of those ancestors Fynn was talking about?" he asked as he picked the shield up, giving it a quick inspection.

"...Presumably." Scarlett also forced herself up. The fall had been violent, but [Sidhe's Flowing Garbs] had done a good job of protecting her from any real damage. If it weren't for [Lifblood's Eternal Circuit] giving her access to the class skill, she probably wouldn't be able to move now.

But now they were in trouble. She pointed to the mountain of stone in front of them. "Is it possible to open up a path?"

Shin studied the barrier. "I doubt it. Fynn is the only one who would even stand a chance of moving some of these stones, and I think it'd be too much even for him. We also can't trust in him even being able to try, if these 'ancestors' can just stop him again."

Scarlett clenched her teeth. That was true. Then what the hell were they supposed to do now? Would they have to try and beat the miniboss by themselves?

Her eyes roamed across the walls of the chamber around them, but she couldn't spot any other way out of here. Nor did she know of any from the game.

"What happens if we're too slow with clearing the trial?" Shin asked.

"Fynn could lose control once more," Scarlett answered. "But I fear it would not be as tame as the previous time."

"That's tame?" Shin frowned. "Then Allyssa and the others would all be in danger."

"...Yes," Scarlett agreed.

So they couldn't even take it slow and *try* to find another way out, assuming the others had managed to avoid being crushed by the cave-in. Judging from how Fynn had acted when making their way here, they were pressed for time too.

"It appears as if we are left with only one alternative," she said slowly.

Shin walked over to the passage that continued further inside the dungeon. "What's at the end of this path?"

"A powerful foe. There should be another one on the opposing side. If both were to be defeated, I believe we will be able to reconvene with the others."

Shin looked at her. "Are you sure?"

Scarlett nodded. "Reasonably so. It is the only route I can think of for us."

"Does Fynn know about that as well?"

Scarlett knitted her brows. "I am uncertain," she said. "Regardless, I do not believe it matters. He is sure to attempt defeating it nonetheless."

"But can they do it?"

"I believe so." They had Garside with them.

Shin tapped his foot against the stone, peering down the dark passage. "So it's up to our end then. Do you think we have a chance?"

Scarlett hesitated to answer. She walked up to him, pulling out her [Wand of Fireball] from her [Pouch of Holding], along with two [Health Potions] that she handed to Shin. "I cannot say. That is why I was not willing to venture everything on it."

He accepted the potions, putting them inside a thick pouch on his waist. "But you do know what kind of opponent it is?"

"To a certain degree," she said as she tried to recall the features of these minibosses. "It is a type of warg, with no particular weaknesses, as far I am aware. I do not believe it will be overly fast, but it will be too strong for you to beat it down by your lonesome."

In the game, it had been level 55. Garside *might* be able to take one by himself—depending on how strong he'd be compared to A-ranked Shielders—but for the rest of them, it was incredibly unlikely.

"With this shield, and Rosa's support, I might be able to withstand it," Shin said. "That means it'll be up to you to wear it down."

Scarlett pressed her lips together. She wasn't sure if she *could* wear it down. She hadn't tried her magic out against anything of that level yet. And the effect of her [Charms of Apperception] likely wouldn't work against it since it was above level 50, which meant one of

her main avenues of dealing damage was severely hampered. She had never expected she would be fighting opponents this strong this early to begin with.

She turned back to look at Rosa, who had been unusually quiet for a while now. "Miss Hale?"

There was no response. Rosa's back was turned to them, and she wasn't moving.

Scarlett stilled. "Rosa?" she called, more softly this time. Slowly walking up to the woman, she reached out a hand and touched the bard's shoulder.

Rosa startled, spinning around to stare at her. "W-What?"

Scarlett's eyes narrowed as she noticed that the area under the woman's eyes had turned a pitch darker.

She'd been afraid of this.

"Are you okay?" she asked, meeting the woman's eyes.

Rosa blinked slowly a couple of times, her gaze refocusing on Scarlett. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just a bit shaken. Almost had the ceiling fall on my old nogging, after all." She glanced at the center of the chamber, then looked around them. "Where are the others?"

Scarlett forced herself to keep a neutral expression. "It appears they are trapped on the other side. If we are to continue, we will have to traverse down that passage and defeat a beast waiting there."

Rosa peeked over Scarlett's shoulder. "I see. Is that all? Why don't we get moving then?"

Scarlett took a step in front of her before she could move anywhere. "This will be dangerous. Truly dangerous. And I do not intend to be crass, but you do not appear to be in prime condition."

Rosa paused. She gave her a long look, before smiling weakly. "I'm bit a tired, yeah. Those mana potions must not have been enough. If we could rest for an hour or two I'm sure I'd be right as rain again though."

"Unfortunately, that is not an alternative. We do not know how much time we have, but we cannot dawdle."

"Is that so?" Rosa cast her eyes downwards. "Then I guess I'll just have to grit my teeth for a bit," she said with a light chuckle.

"...Will you be all right?" Scarlett asked.

Rosa bent down and picked up her kler from the ground, patting it on the side. "Of course. I've fought through hangovers that have been worse than this. And from the sounds of it, we don't have much other choice, do we?"

Scarlett eyed her closely. She knew that Rosa was far from 'well' right now. But it might be true that the woman would be able to fight through it for the time being. And they wouldn't stand a chance without her. Waiting was also too risky. In fact, it was likely to make Rosa's situation even worse.

"Take this," she said, pulling off her [Ring of Umbral Defiance] from her finger and handing it to Rosa. The dark-type resistance it gave helped defend against most types of mental attacks, which could prove helpful in the upcoming fight. It might be a relatively low-level item, but it was better than nothing. And right now, it looked like Rosa had more need of it than Scarlett.

She turned away from Rosa and walked up to Shin. They would just have to hope that the woman made it through the fight. As long as they survived that, Scarlett had a couple of emergency measures she could take to deal with whatever situation might emerge.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, before opening them and setting her sights down the dark passage. "Then let us move."

Shin went at the front, with Scarlett and Rosa following several steps behind. They relied on Scarlett's magic to light the way, but she made sure to keep her enchanted glasses on in case something happened.

They walked through the tight passage for a few minutes, before reaching a point where it opened up into a wide, circular room. It looked more like a cave than the rest of the dungeon had, with the walls being damp and uneven, and was lit up by a hole in the ceiling. Sunlight shone through, concentrated on the center of the room where a large shape with jet-black fur lay curled up, with tail in front. Behind the shape, on the far end of the room, was a set of closed stone doors.

The wolf—or rather, the warg—looked up as Shin stepped into the room. The young man raised his shield and readied his sword.

The beast went up on all fours and let out a low growl, baring its fangs. It stood at roughly the same height as him.

Shin threw one last glance back at them, Scarlett nodding back at him, before he took off towards the warg.

Scarlett conjured four Aqua Mines in front of the boss, aiming for its eyes. The warg reacted quickly though, running straight through the mines with its head lowered before she could detonate them.

Notes rang out from beside Scarlett, creating a discordant unity as they reached the warg. She saw how a grey luster attached itself to the warg, its movements slowing somewhat just as it bore down upon Shin with open jaws. He held up his shield and its teeth caught on the edges of the metal. Its legged kicked off from the ground as the warg tried to reach past the shield and forced Shin back.

Scarlett summoned several more Aqua Mines on both sides of the warg, all of a larger size than usual, and detonated them as soon as she could. Waves of boiling water slammed into the beast's sides, but it didn't show any reaction as it continued pushing against Shin.

As Scarlett had feared she couldn't see through its defense at all with her [Charms of Apperception], and every one of her attacks was essentially a shot in the dark.

Shin himself tried to force the warg's head aside with his shield and drive his sword into its abdomen, but he was clearly having trouble. Scarlett felt a rush of power stream into her body as Rosa played another tune. The boost was enough for Shin to knock the beast's head away just long enough for him to cut forward with his weapon.

The warg reacted quickly and tried to leap back, but it passed straight through the wall of high-intensity fire Scarlett had conjured behind it. A loud yelp echoed out across the room as Scarlett let the fire dissipate. She saw that parts of its fur had been singed by the attack. It wasn't much, and using her fire like that was incredibly costly, but this mean she *could* hurt it.

A silver light gradually started taking shape around Shin's sword. Recognizing it, Scarlett hurried to form another wall of fire between him and the warg to stop it from attacking immediately. The warg immediately ran around it, however, its sights seemingly now set on her. As she dispelled her firewall she raised her [Wand of Fireball].

"No you don't!" Shin shouted as he cut in from the side, the light around his sword spread out before him like a brilliant lance. The weapon slashed straight into the side of the warg, but it was only enough to create a gash as the silvery lance dissolved into the air. The beast's head spun towards him with a growl, its mouth shooting out to bite into his outstretched arm. Shin let out a scream as its teeth tore through the metal on his bracers.

Scarlett used her wand to cast two fireballs in immediate succession, aiming at the side of the warg to avoid hitting Shin. The spells burst forth into fiery explosions. It was enough to force the warg to release its grip on Shin, but they didn't seem to cause any real damage. Was the spell to low level? Or was it her pyromancy that was too low?

She pushed all those thoughts to the back of her mind as she raised her hand and conjured a low-intensity wall of fire between the warg and Shin, hoping it'd be enough to just hold the beast off for a moment as Rosa healed him.

Thankfully the warg stayed still for a moment, giving the flames a wary look as Rosa ran forward to perform her magic. A mellow tune sounded out as a purple light enveloped Shin.

The warg's attention turned away from the fire, back to Scarlett and Rosa. Scarlett immediately put her hand into her pouch as it started moving, conjuring and detonating several Aqua Mines between them to try and delay the warg. It dodged to the side a couple of times but still closed in quickly.

Rosa ran to the side, but now it was focusing on Scarlett again. Shin was trying to catch up but he was too slow. Scarlett didn't even try running away from the beast. There was no way she would make it. Instead, she pulled out her hand from her pouch, holding a small glass bauble, and willed the object into the air. A section of the object was filled with water, and it

was enough for her to steer it straight at the warg as it came at her. Then, at the last second, she formed a high-intensity wall of fire between them and threw herself to the side.

A crack sounded out and she felt something tear into her side. It was only a graze, and [Sidhe's Flowing Garb] was still active, but a burst of pain still shot through her body.

Landing roughly on the ground, she heard loud simperings from behind her. Quickly repositioning herself, she looked back at the warg to see it throwing its head back and forth as several large spots on its face burned.

While Scarlett had focused on having Allyssa make health potions, that didn't mean she *only* did that. Scarlett had wanted to experiment, and Allyssa had known several concoctions that were highly flammable and hard to extinguish.

A purple light enveloped her and the pain from her side lessened considerably as she felt Rosa's magic suffuse her. Her injury closed itself within moments.

At the same time, Shin came running with sword raised, cutting down towards the warg. The blade cut into its behind, leaving a small wound and removing some singed fur, but it was hardly enough to bring the warg down.

It snarled and spun its head like a mallet, slamming into Shin's shield and knocking him back several steps. One of its eyes was completely burnt by the flames, while the other was closed but remained intact. Despite that, its head pointed to Shin as it attacked him once again.

Scarlett crawled away and hurried to her feet as Shin exchanged more blows with the warg, aided by more of Rosa's boosting magic. Scarlett stopped when she saw the warg jump back a few meters. It lowered down onto its haunched and let out a low howl that quickly rose in strength.

Scarlett had to cover her ears as the noise grew louder, an inkling sense of dread rising up from within before suddenly spluttering out into nothingness. The warg she'd fought back in Whistlecreek had a similar attack, but it had been equally ineffective against her.

She clenched her teeth as she noticed that both Shin and Rosa had turned completely motionless from the attack. So much for lending Rosa that ring. While mental attacks in general had proved pretty fruitless against Scarlett—for reasons Scarlett wasn't completely sure of yet—she had no good way of protecting others from them.

As soon as the howl stopped Scarlett removed her hands from her head and created a large number of Aqua Mines in front of the warg. It didn't seem to notice all of them in time, being blasted in the face by five torrents of water, but the damage was minimal compared to what the alchemical concoction did.

It growled in her direction, eye still closed as the fur on its snout burned.

"Rosa! Shin! she called out, but neither of her allies stirred.

She conjured another wall of fire when she saw the warg was about to move, this time surrounding it entirely to buy as much time as possible. She used her wand to cast two

fireballs for good measure as well, before running up to Shin. He was staring straight ahead with eyes wide open.

"This is no time to remain idle!" she snapped and shook his shoulder, but there was no reaction. She threw a look back towards the warg. Her cage of fire was consuming a massive amount of mana, but it seemed the warg was at least afraid of her magic now.

Scarlett turned back to Shin with a frown. How strong was this effect on him? The debilitating howl of wargs in the game had usually just been a debuff or a short stun, but this was much more than that. Was it because they were all so much weaker than the warg?

Not knowing what else to do, she threw her hand up and slapped Shin across the face. Surprisingly, it actually seemed to generate a small response. She did it again, and soon Shin's eyes slowly regained their focus. He turned to her with a disoriented expression.

"I still require your aid," she said and pointed behind her. Just as she did, it appeared as if the warg had finally had enough as it jumped through her fire and escaped from its temporary confinement. Scarlett tried to move the fire along with it, but the warg was too fast so she quickly dispelled her flames to save what little mana she had left.

**[Mana: 467/4474]**

Maybe she *should* have saved some of those mana potions for herself. Rosa still seemed to be out of the fight.

The warg started running towards the two of them, and Shin stepped in front of her to meet the attack. Scarlett jumped to the side as the beast flew into Shin, now with all of its strength. The two of them flew back several meters as the warg landed on top of Shin. He screamed as claws tore into his sides, its jaws repeatedly trying to get past his Shield.

Scarlett pulled out a second of those glass baubles from her pouch. It was the last one she had. Raising it up, she used this opening in the warg's defenses to let it crash into the warg's side where Shin had caused the first wound. The glass splattered and a transparent liquid spread over the injury and the surrounding fur. A small mental effort on Scarlett's part was all it took to light it up.

The warg growled at the sudden fire tearing into its side and got off of Shin. The young Shielder was covered in blood as he shakily pushed himself to the ground, left hand now limp to the side as he held up just his sword.

The warg leapt around like mad now, trying to put out the fires across its body, but all it succeeded in was making smoke spread around the room. Scarlett could actually see how parts of its face were now starting to tear off where the flames were touching. While she couldn't be completely sure about it, the defenses around that area must be weakening. "Targets its face!" she yelled.

The wolf kept jumping around until suddenly, it just stopped. For some reason, instead of returning its attention to either Scarlett or the injured Shin, its snout shifted towards the unmoving Rosa.

Scarlett's eyes widened. "Stop it!" she called out as it started running. She created another firewall with what remained of her mana, but the warg didn't even seem to care about that now, continuing straight through the flames.

Shin wasn't about to let it have its way though. He came running from the side, putting his entire weight into it as he slammed into the warg and managed to knock it off its path. The two of them landed on the stone once again, and the warg bit into Shin's shoulder to try and throw him off. Shin continued to resist though, raising his right arm as his sword started glowing again. A miniature variant of his previous silver lance began forming.

Scarlett stretched whatever reserves she had left inside herself to create one last sphere of high-intensity fire in front of the warg's face as it struggled with the Shielder. Just as what remained of Scarlett's mana petered out, Shin sunk his shining weapon straight into the warg's face, digging into its head. The beast stilled, and Shin dropped his sword.

A sharp pain pushed against the sides of Scarlett's temple as the exhaustion that came from using all of her mana hit her. She breathed heavily as she stepped forward, eyes focused on Shin's now limp body. Mana depletion was no joke, but she had to help him. She wasn't sure Rosa was in any condition to heal him right now.

Moving her hands unsteadily, she reached down to her pouch of holding to pull out a health potion, but froze when she looked up and saw that Rosa was staring at her.

And the woman's eyes were completely black.