

71: Extreme mountaineering

Scarlett held the thick wool shawl closely around her as she looked out across the water. She stood at the bow of a ship, traveling down a steady stream that stretched out before her, continuing northeast.

The Three Streams river was wide. Wider than any river she had personally seen in her life. They were traveling close to the western bank and the other shore could only be seen in the distance, where some of the rocky outcroppings and the low, hilly area north of Kilsfell made for a rather dull scenery for any listless maritime passengers.

This was the first time she'd traveled on a body of water like this for any longer than a few minutes, and although it was a somewhat novel experience, she couldn't say she was especially fond of it. Seasickness hadn't proven to be an issue, fortunately, but it was much colder than she thought it would have been. Even though the sun stood high in the sky, the winds were rough and fall was starting to set into the land. The large mountain range immediately to their west might also have something to do with the cold winds, but she wasn't a meteorologist so she couldn't say.

The ship they were on wasn't particularly large, lacking all but a tiny sail at its center that felt far too small even for this vessel. There was a small group of rowers that had been working hard for the last couple of hours to maintain their speed, though Scarlett did wonder how much effect the downstream flow of the river itself might also be adding to that. At any rate, they weren't moving that fast. She had long since stopped counting the number of other ships she'd seen travel past them. Unfortunately, this vessel had been their best option under their current circumstances.

After she had ordered it, her staff *had* somehow been able to arrange passage through the Kilnstone to Angerong Post, much faster than she had feared it would take. But six days had still passed since Fynn awakened, and they were probably skirting on the edge of what time they had left by now.

Scarlett had considered whether it wouldn't be quicker to charter a ship in Freybrook and make the journey all the way from there, but Fynn had been unconscious until two days prior, and there also didn't seem to be many ships willing to stop near their destination. Or that could, for that matter.

So instead, after they'd arrived through the Kilnstone in Angersong Post earlier today—which turned out to be one of the few places she found to be almost as large here as it had been in the game, not having much more than a village located on a thin piece of arid land with a small forest nearby—they had instead gathered up a bunch of the local men and convinced them to use one of their ships to take Scarlett's party up north with. It had cost a few thousand solars, but she didn't really have the privilege to care about things like budget at the moment.

With Fynn having been unconscious for far longer than she had expected—possibly a consequence of them interrupting him when he was first awakening—things were stressful. When he woke up he had been somewhat out of it, but Scarlett had tried to roughly explain the situation on their end. At the time he hadn't even appeared to react to the fact that she had shared some of his past with the others, instead being entirely intent on leaving to deal with

his awakening. It had taken her some real convincing for him not to leave immediately, and to instead wait for them so that they could join him in his journey to the Howling's Gales Haunt. But he had been particularly antsy these last days.

He was currently sitting at the back of the ship, seemingly absorbed in his own thoughts. She assumed it had something to do with whatever the awakening itself actually pertained to him, mentally, as a person, but she wasn't sure about the particulars. She just knew that the longer he went without performing the first trial in the Howling Gale's Haunt, the more it would affect him, and eventually, he would lose control completely.

"We're pulling in near that cliff!" a gruff voice called out from the center of the ship, and Scarlett turned to look as a burly man pointed towards an outcropping of rocks to their left, shouting further orders at the men manning the ship.

Her eyes turned to the others, who also were at the back. It was the only section of the ship that had much extra space for them to sit around. She had gone up to the bow to get some space, though Garside had repeatedly gone up to her to check that things were alright. He'd given her this shawl, for one thing.

Rosa was also by her lonesome at the moment, sitting on top of a small crate not too far from where the rowers were in the middle of the ship. The bard had begun the trip with her usual merry appearance, playing songs for the crew to enjoy and pulling some jokes, but she'd stopped at some point when Scarlett wasn't paying attention, switching to tuning her klerl with a distant look instead. Scarlett was pretty sure it didn't take that long to tune an instrument.

She observed Rosa as the ship started moving closer to the shore. Her worries for the woman had grown ever since talking with her in the courtyard the week before. She hadn't been aware of something like this in the game, and it was always hard to judge the bard's state because of how she often carried herself, but it felt like these bouts of hers were growing more and more common.

Scarlett supposed she could understand where it could come from, but it had still surprised her the first time she had noticed it. She was really hoping it was just her imagination, or that she was jumping to conclusions because of what she knew. There was enough on her plate with Fynn's issues right now, so if something else was to crop up there wasn't a guarantee that she would be able to deal with it.

After a couple of minutes, she shifted her gaze to the approaching shore. To the right of the cliff they were aiming toward, the shoreline consisted of a large bed of small stones that stretched northwards. Following it with her eyes, some paths led up to a more elevated area where she saw signs of a settlement. It seemed like they had almost reached Dimfrost.

They were currently close to the edge of the northern border of the mountain range. The nearest mountaintops now were actually visible, compared to how most of them had been hidden by the clouds further down south. Soon, they would also be climbing up *into* that range.

Overall, it took roughly ten minutes for them to get the ship to the shore and lodged on the stones in a safe enough manner that it didn't damage the ship and allowed all of the

passengers to get off. The majority of the crew then appeared to sit down on some of the larger rocks to rest. After leaving Scarlett and her gang they would soon continue back to Angersong Post, which would probably take them a few hours when going upstream.

Scarlett had considered asking them to stay here until they returned, but without having any real as to when that was, or how much that would cost, she had given up on that idea.

She took one last look at her party. Allyssa and Shin were decked out in their usual Shielder attire, looking about as prepared as one could expect. Rosa had her klerst strapped over her shoulder, now back to wearing her usual smile. Scarlett had procured some decent traveling attire for the woman, as well as given her some simple magical equipment gathered from their different dungeon runs. It wasn't anything special, mostly just a couple of leather bracers and other items that raised some resistances and such, but it was what she had for the woman.

Garside, in comparison, wore an interesting set of what looked like black studded leather armor, but instead of leather, it was some sort of fabric similar to ordinary wool. He probably hadn't worn it for some time, that much was clear. It was a bit too long along some of the seams and around the shoulders, but it still made the old butler look a lot more adventurous than Scarlett was used to. In addition to that, he was also wearing the [Bag of Juham] across his shoulder, with her having put him in charge of it.

She wasn't sure exactly what kind of armor it was, but Garside had assured her that it had served him well through many conflicts in the past and would be more than enough for him now, so she didn't have any complaints. It was almost definitely better than anything she could have given him right now, and considering how he was probably the most powerful in their group at the moment, she needed him as strong as he could get.

Her eyes turned to the last in their group. Fynn was staring off towards the mountain peaks with an incredibly focused expression, as if he was listening to the winds themselves. While she was stressed about it all, the usually innocent—if somewhat coarse—young man was the one worst affected by the delay in getting here.

Finding that everyone seemed ready, they set out and followed the shore until they reached the paths up to where Dimfrost was. The nearest building looked to be an old outpost of some kind, presumably built to be able to look out over the river when needed. It was a small ramshackle shed, with a stone fire pit next to it that didn't look to have been used for some time.

Passing by it, when they reached the crest of the path they were climbing, they were afforded a view of a large valley leading down to the northwest, surrounded by high cliffsides. Nestled in the valley was a large village, but the far end was covered by a massive wall of broken stone that almost looked like it might have been carved straight out of one of the nearby mountainsides.

"Is this Dimfrost?" Allyssa asked, looking out across the valley.

"It is," Scarlett said, then turned to look at Fynn. "Do you wish to visit them before we continue?"

He violently shook his head. "No. Not now. They'd want to come," he said, then pointed to a narrow passage that began at the mouth of the valley and led up into the mountains to their left. "We don't have to enter the village at all."

Scarlett's gaze followed the path. It continued up the base of the nearest mountain but quickly disappeared among the steep ridges. It might not be an issue for Fynn and his people, but she certainly wasn't excited about the prospect of climbing up all of that. While over a month of training had certainly helped her get in much better shape than when she first arrived in this world, she was still far off from what she would describe as 'athletic'.

She glanced back at Garside, who stood behind her with an unreadable expression.

He was pretty old as well. She had no idea if his strength was what she presumed a magic-caster did anything for his stamina, or if she would have a hard time as well. Unfortunately she didn't have many stamina-boosting items yet. The only one she'd gotten so far was the [Plate of Torn Resilience], which sacrificed HP for stamina, and she'd sold that long ago.

There was a similar item found after defeating the first boss here in the Howling Gale's Haunt, so hopefully she could get her hands on that at least. In the future, when she didn't have other priorities over it, she might also be able to get Allyssa to make some stamina potions and the like. But for now, they would just have to make do. She would just have to pray that she didn't end up giving the old butler a stroke or something.

They set down towards the valley, veering off onto the path Fynn had pointed out, and started to climb at a decent pace. It was clear that Fynn wanted to go faster, but Scarlett had gotten him to promise not to go off on his own. While Scarlett knew where the Howling Gale's Haunt's entrance was *in theory*, they didn't have time to search through the range by themselves just to find it. The Whitdown Mountains was bound to be one of those places that was a lot larger in reality than it had been in 'Chronicle of Realms'.

Thankfully for her, the path wasn't as bad as Scarlett had feared, with there being a clear trail up the base of the mountain, which in itself was relatively bare of trees and other vegetation. The section they were climbing also wasn't overly steep, so while she definitely got out of breath at some sections—and would feel some serious soreness in her legs later on—they made some good headway with Fynn leading at the front.

After about two or so hours of trekking, they reached an overhang where this section of the mountain connected with another, smaller, mountain further into the range.

Scarlett inwardly let out a sigh when they stopped near it. This part also wasn't on the list of things she was terribly excited over.

"Now we go down," Fynn said, looking down the steep precipice.

The others in the group all stared at him.

"...You're not serious, are you?" Allyssa asked.

"I am," Fynn said, walking even closer to the edge. He leaned over with almost his whole body—which made Scarlett feel deeply uncomfortable—and pointed down at the mountain wall.

Scarlett didn't bother going closer and checking like the others did. She already knew what was there. There was a small crevice in the face of the mountain that they would have to climb down to.

"We're going down *there*?" Allyssa had gone down on her knees and peered over the edge, one hand firmly grasped around Shin's leg. "How?!"

Fynn gave her a bewildered look. "We climb?"

"We're hundreds of meters up from the ground. And there's barely anything to grab hold of here. If we fall we'll die!"

Fynn furrowed his brows. "We learn to do this when we're six."

Allyssa shook her head in disbelief. "The more I hear about your people the more amazed I am. Are you even human!?"

He looked like he was about to say something, then turned to look at Scarlett. "I thought she told you? She knows already."

"I only shared what was necessary with them. If you wish to tell them more, it is your decision."

He kept looking at her for several seconds, and Scarlett was unsure what was going through his mind.

Shin spoke up, gathering everyone's attention. "I think I might be able to, but it's clear that not everyone can make this climb." He glanced at Scarlett. "Is there a plan?"

Garside took a step forward, clearing his throat. "My Lady has already prepared for this scenario," he said, pulling off the [Bag of Juham] hanging over his shoulder and extracting a set of thick ropes, iron pitons, and leather belts to tie it all to.

Scarlett had asked him to procure it all before they left and, remembering what it had been like when she last did this with Kat, chose to also take some extra precautions. The butler, of course, had given her a funny look at the request, but as with most things, he carried out her order without issue. He also seemed to have a flair for the dramatic, considering how he chose to declare it like that.

Scarlett was pretty sure he'd been in contact with Evelyne regarding things, but she didn't know how much the younger Hartford sister had shared of their situation. It certainly seemed like the old man had accepted the sudden changes in Scarlett's personality with grace, but whatever his exact thoughts on the matter were was still a mystery.

"Well well, I would have expected no less from our dear Baroness," Rosa hummed as she picked up one of the ropes in her hands.

Scarlett saw Garside frown slightly at the bard's words, but he stayed quiet.

"It'll still take a while to get down there," Shin said, peering over the cliff edge. "If we're doing it safely like this, it'll probably take up to an hour."

Fynn scowled. "What?"

"We can't all go down at once, and preparing all the equipment and creating a way to climb down will take a while."

"That's too slow." Fynn's tone grew more serious. "We need to get there faster. They're calling."

"Who's they?" Allyssa asked, but Fynn didn't answer. Instead, his eyes were focused on Scarlett and the edge, moving back and forth between them.

For a second, Scarlett thought he was thinking about continuing on alone, but just as she was about to speak he stepped closer to her and lifted her up in his arms.

"What are you—"

She let out a cry as the air surged up around them and Fynn pulled her *off* the edge. A sinking feeling tore its way into her stomach as their speed increased at a terrifying rate. Her mind froze for a second when she saw the stone protrusions on the ground move closer. Closing her eyes, suddenly she felt a strong gust push at them from underneath and the side, followed by a jolt through her entire body as they landed on hard ground. Opening her eyes, she saw that they were now inside the crevice.

As Fynn let her down on the ground Scarlett had to take a moment just to regain her balance, feeling a tide of anger well up from inside. She turned to glare at Fynn. "Do not *ever* do that again without my permission."

He seemed to genuinely pause at her reaction, quietly opening and closing his mouth.

She felt a serious need to *teach the little fool* a lesson and snap at him some more, but forced herself to rein some of it in as she took a deep breath. Her heart was beating like crazy from thinking she was going to die for a moment, and she could hear voices call out from above.

After closing her eyes, taking a short while to calm down, she looked back at Fynn. "Return up and inform them that I am uninjured. If it is within your abilities, you can also bring them down in the same manner. **However**," she stressed the last word and met his eyes. "Ensure that you do *not* do it without both a warning and their *explicit* permission."

He looked back at her with what was probably a mix between embarrassment and annoyance, but soon gave her a short nod and disappeared out the opening of the cave.

Scarlett let out an audible sigh as he left.

She didn't care how much more efficient it was. This was most definitely worse than last time.

Turning away from the opening, she looked deeper inside the space. It was a few meters wide at the mouth, continuing just far enough into the mountain for the light from outside to not all the way.

She put her hand down to her waist, where her [Pouch of Holding] was tightly fastened, and pulled out a pair of black-tinted glasses. Putting them on, she squinted her eyes as the light from outside became slightly stronger and the darkness around her cleared up significantly.

There was a stone obelisk placed at the far end of the crevice, with peculiar markings etched into its face. Several of them resembled fangs and wolfs, but she wasn't sure about the rest. They were centered around a circular space on the stone that had been carved into the shape of a handprint.

A loud scream sounded out from behind as Scarlett felt the wind move behind her. Scarlett spun to see Fynn land at the opening with a flustered Allyssa in his arms. The young Shielder quickly climbed off him with her hand pressed against her chest, and Fynn himself immediately disappeared once again.

"I take it you are not fond of heights?" Scarlett asked, stepping over to the girl.

"I don't mind as long as I'm not falling *down them*," Allyssa pressed out. The girl raised her free hand to fix her hair, also checking that her goggles were still there.

Scarlett gave a slow nod. "I am inclined to agree."

Allyssa's gaze moved past Scarlett and into the darkness behind her. "Wait, does this even lead anywhere?"

"It does."

Allyssa paused at that, but seemed to accept it without further questions. Instead, she turned to look at Scarlett's face. "Are those the enchanted glasses you ordered?"

"They are indeed." Scarlett pushed them up with a finger. "They are quite useful. However, if you are curious—" She waved her hand and conjured a large sphere of fire to illuminate the whole space.

Allyssa blinked a few times at the sudden light, but then her eyes moved towards the stone obelisk. "What's that?"

"That is a good question," Scarlett said. "But perhaps we should wait for the others before we delve into it any further."

They did not have to wait long, as within a few minutes, Fynn had climbed up and jumped down with the other members of their party. Seeing him carry an old man like Garside in what almost amounted to a princess carry was certainly a sight to behold, though Scarlett wasn't quite sure if the amusement she derived from the odd sight was enough to assuage the remaining irritation she felt towards the young man.

"Fynn," she eventually said as their group pressed together in the opening of the crevice, with Fynn standing the furthest away from Garside now. While he hadn't said anything now, she had her suspicions that the butler had had some choice words to share with Fynn back up at the top. "I believe it might be time for you to demonstrate what it is we must do next."

He threw one look at her, then started walking deeper into the crevice. "It's simple," he said, eventually stopping in front of the obelisk. Raising his hand, he touched it to the center of the stone where the handprint was. A brief flash of light filled the space as he suddenly disappeared.

The others all stared on.

"Is...Is that a *Kilnstone*?" Allyssa asked.

"I do not believe so, no," Scarlett answered.

"But it just teleported him somewhere, didn't it?!"

"The Kilnstones are not the only artifacts capable of magical translocation. Have you forgotten the pavilion in Temisbrook Glade?"

"Oh...Right," Allyssa mumbled.

"So, we're following wolf-boy through that then?" Rosa asked, gesturing towards the obelisk.

"It would appear that is our only avenue," Scarlett said as she started walking towards the stone object.

"Is it safe?" Allyssa asked.

Scarlett stopped in front of it, throwing one last glance back at the others. "I would certainly hope so," she said and raised her hand.

Garside stepped forward. "My Lady! Wa—"

Her palm touched the cold stone and everything turned white.