

## 75: Old dogs don't need new tricks

Like the mini-boss room, the true boss room looked more like a cave than any man-made construct, with uneven walls and a vaguely circular shape. A shallow pool of water covered much of the ground in the middle of the cave, with a pedestal holding a large orb that gave off a pale blue light standing at its center. That, coupled with several large braziers hanging off the walls that lit up as Scarlett entered, lent the space an enigmatic atmosphere.

There was no boss to be seen, though that was to be expected. To Scarlett's right was another entrance like the one she'd entered through. She kept her eyes fixed on it as, after a moment, Fynn appeared. His head turned towards her, a hesitant expression appearing on his face. Soon, Garside and Allyssa exited beside him.

Garside closed his eyes for a second, hand pressed to his chest. "My Lady," he said as the three of them began making their way to her. "I am relieved to see that you are well."

He paused, looking down at her side. While Scarlett's injury had been healed, the blood from it remained.

"Miss Hale's healing has already dealt with it," she said as the butler's eyes rose. "There is no need to worry."

She peered at the room behind her. "Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the others condition. Shin, especially, might require further aid."

Allyssa stepped forward. "Is he okay?"

"For now, yes. Miss Hale saw to that. But I am uncertain when he will regain consciousness." Scarlett examined Allyssa and the two others. "It appears you fared much better than us."

*She* felt like she'd just run an Olympic marathon, but they didn't even have the slightest cut.

Allyssa leaned over, peering into the room behind Scarlett. "There was a big wolf on our end, but Garside handled it quickly. We were worried about you guys."

Scarlett blinked, looking at the butler.

So even a level 55 mini-boss didn't stand a chance against him? That probably put him somewhere along the upper echelons of A-ranked Shielders. Much higher than she would've dared hope. The old man's exaggerated humility was strange, but it didn't matter. Maybe she *didn't* have to worry as much about the upcoming boss fight as she'd feared.

She noticed Fynn looking between her and the orb at the center of the room.

"Fynn."

He instantly turned to her.

“I will not disparage you for what happened,” she said, turning an eye towards Garside. She suspected Fynn had already received a thorough interrogation on the subject. “And the matter of *why* it happened can be saved for another time. I understand that you need to start the trial soon. However, I ask that you wait a short while longer, if possible.”

He fiddled with the ring on his finger. “I’m not sure. They’re telling me to...” he trailed off, then a determined look appeared on his face. “I’ll try my best.”

“Good. It will not take long.”

Scarlett led them inside the mini-boss room behind her. Allyssa gasped as she got closer to Shin, finding him bloody and pinned under the warg’s body. Scarlett ordered Fynn to lift it away as Allyssa picked up Shin’s sword and shield. Together, they then brought him into the main boss room at Scarlett’s command, leaning him against a wall. They couldn’t leave him back there, even if he was unconscious.

After some prodding, they also managed to briefly wake Rosa, getting the spent woman to move as well before she fell asleep soon after. She appeared even more drained than even Scarlett. A mix of mana exhaustion and getting possessed was the most likely cause.

After they’d ensured those two were taken care of, everyone’s attention turned to the boss room itself. Scarlett wanted nothing more than to just drop down on the floor as well, but rest wasn’t an option for her.

“Do we still have to take this... trial?” Allyssa asked, staring at the glowing orb. “If it’s as dangerous as you said, and we only have the four of us...”

She turned to Shin and Rosa. “Would we even be able to keep them safe?”

“We do not have much choice, at this point,” Scarlett answered. “It is our only means of leaving. And ignoring it risks another incident like the one before.”

Who knows what Fynn’s ancestors would do if they just *stopped* here?

“If that is the case.” Garside stepped in front of Scarlett. “I ask that you do not take part in the coming battle, my Lady.”

Scarlett arched an eyebrow. “You do not even know the strength of our opponent. Do you truly believe it wise to lower our fighting capability in a situation such as this?”

“That is why I am asking this, my Lady.” He lowered his head. “You may try to hide it, but this last clash has exhausted you. Were you to take part in your current state, I fear that an even worse fate would befall you. I will exercise all my effort so that you do not have to worry, so I beg you my Lady, please rest.”

She stared at the man. He wasn’t *wrong*. Her mana *was* depleted. She *was* pushing herself to remain standing. There was no more magic from Rosa to keep her full of energy like on their trek here, either. She was, in essence, dead weight.

But just staying back and *doing nothing* wasn't an alternative when their lives were at stake. It felt wrong, in more ways than one, to just leave it all up to others. She had at least planned on trying to push her limit and assist with the odd Aqua Mine or two.

In hindsight, maybe that was a monumentally poor idea. She was just as liable to annoy the boss and put herself in more danger like that. It certainly wouldn't do any damage.

And Garside *was* strong. Maybe they stood a chance, even without her. It might have been the mental fatigue at work, thinking she could do much to help now. She didn't *always* have to be in control, did she? She could just view it as delegating.

"Very well." She stepped over to the back wall. Lowering herself, she placed her hands on her lap as she took in the three others. "I pray that you will overcome this trial."

Allyssa suddenly looked nervous, but Garside gave a short bow. "I will not disappoint, my Lady."

Fynn started moving towards the pool at the center of the room. Water splattered around his feet as he walked up to the orb, stretching out his right hand.

The ring on his finger took on a bright blue glow, matching the light of the orb. Above, a translucent figure began forming, soon taking the shape of a wolf made of that very same light. It looked magnificent, scattering its light across the cave in thin trails, illuminating the surroundings. Standing still in the air, the wolf's head turned down at Fynn, and a powerful howl echoed out.

The trial had started.

Perhaps it was because the previous battle had already worn her out, but Scarlett could barely keep up with what happened. Fynn leaped at the boss, the wind around the room soaring with him, yet the boss sprang through the air and effortlessly eluded him. The two began a game of cat and mouse, darting around the space faster than anything Scarlett had ever seen.

What was shocking was that the boss was almost entirely on the defensive. Every time it stopped for even a moment to retaliate, it was met by a blast of searing hot flames. Scarlett could practically *see* the heat coming off them, even from where she sat.

She wasn't sure if Garside was using a spell or if it was just pure pyrokinesis—if she were to guess, it was a manifest spell of some sort—but the precision of his attacks was impeccable, even when he kept watch of the battle from a good distance away. While his magic didn't seem enough to heavily injure the boss, it was as if he was using it to direct the movements of both the boss *and* Fynn, keeping strict control of what the wolf boss could do.

Occasionally, the boss paused for brief moments to let out short howls—often incurring a good amount of damage from both Fynn and Garside—which caused several smaller light wolves to come into being around the room. But Allyssa, who seemed to have trouble keeping up with the boss itself, distracted many of them with her crossbow, before slowly picking them off with the help of Garside's magic and her alchemical concoctions.

This was a level of coordination that Scarlett and her party had never even come close to. And it was all because of Garside's constant direction of events as he let the others make perfect use of their skills. Even though this would only have been the second time he fought along either of the two.

He really *had* underplayed his skill.

Scarlett watched on as the fight continued. The light of the wolf boss gradually faded as Fynn and Garside wore it down with their attacks. Fynn's control of his surroundings seemed to develop as the fighting progressed. He also made more and more frequent use of the [Claws of Tempest] ability that he'd learned, along with [Gale of Blades] — another ability Scarlett recognized but hadn't been aware he knew. It was clear even to her untrained eyes that his mastery of the abilities was improving dramatically.

After about fifteen minutes, it had reached a point where the boss had faded to be not much more than a shadow of its former self, and Fynn was the one to strike the last blow. Caging it in an array of intensive flames, Garside locked the boss in so that Fynn could leap up, winds roaring with him, and slash at the neck of the wolf. His claws tore straight through its body, and it disappeared into a mote of lights that surged into Fynn as he landed in the shallow water beneath.

Scarlett gaped at the sight of it all. A problem she'd spent almost a whole week worrying herself to death over had been solved just like that. In a long battle of attrition, with minimal fanfare. If it hadn't been for the situation with Rosa, she would almost have felt ridiculous calling this a real dungeon run.

To think Garside was *that* strong.

Honestly, if it just came to power, she'd gauge him to be somewhere in the low 60s or high 50s range, level-wise. That's the same level this boss had been, which was originally supposed to be fought by a team of level 50s. And even then, it was supposed to be a hard fight.

But being around the same level in the game wouldn't have translated into a curb stomping *this* big. While Garside himself hadn't looked overwhelmingly more powerful than the boss, it was clear that his experience more than made up for that. He was used to fighting in groups like this.

Scarlett thought she'd been pretty clever with how she used her magic in some of her fights, but this made her realize that fighting was about a lot more than just pure power and some simple tricks.

Now that Kat was gone, she'd trained all by herself. But if possible, she had to get Garside to teach her. Even if she could only get a *basic* grasp of how he controlled the battlefield as he did, it might still be worth more than any other practice she could do.

She raised herself off the ground. "An impressive display, Garside. I am glad you chose to come with me."

He looked back at her and bowed. "Of course, my Lady."

Walking past him, Scarlett trailed around the edge of the pool of water. She passed by Fynn, who'd fallen to his knees with glowing eyes now after the light entered him. He'd just cleared the trial, so he would probably stay like that for a while longer.

She stopped before an illustration of a wolf that was carved into the wall at the far end of the room. She pressed her hand against the palm print at its center, and the wall started splitting. Slowly but surely, stone creaking against stone, it widened into an opening into a dark room.

The enchanted glasses allowed her to see fine without having to use her magic, so entering the small, unlit hollow, Scarlett looked around. Lying on a bed of cut stone was an array of items. Her eyes passed over them, from left to right.

#### **[Mark of the Staunch (Epic)]**

{This ring, fashioned in the likeness of an ancient artifact, bears an air of frigidness and vigor}

The ring was similar to [Mark of the Gale], yet grey instead of the pure bone-white of Fynn's ring. Like [Mark of the Gale], this ring gave a boost to HP and stamina, as well as giving some frost resistance. In fact, the boosts from this ring were better than the original, although it had no other effects. Still, it would have been a nice item to have on the way here.

#### **[Garment of Form (Epic)]**

{Forms of movements once made are engraved into this fabric, begging to flow once more}

This was a set of interwoven, pale green shirts, with lines of black sewn onto it in curious patterns. Scarlett couldn't quite remember the specifics of this item, but she was sure it had increased agility in the game.

#### **[Fang of Remembrance (Unique)]**

{This fang once recalled the tales of old, yet now it sits split and empty. It longs of becoming whole, and to once more sing the songs embedded in it}

Her eyes stayed on the fang. It was a dull silver, about the length of her hand, and bent at the top like a wolf's canine. There were several cracks near its base, as if it had been torn off of what held it before, and running along its sides were a multitude of tiny carvings, symbols, and etchings that were indecipherable to her.

*This* was what Scarlett wanted the most, out of all the things here. Unfortunately, this item was useless without its other half.

It was just evil game design to only give half of the item like this. Especially if you knew what you could do with it. Still, she was glad to get her hands on one half at least.

The next item on the stone was an enormous bow of bent, spiraling bone, as well as a spear.

#### **[Bow of Ends (Epic)]**

{The essence of those beings felled by this bow rests within it, awaiting more brethren}

#### **[Spear of Ends (Epic)]**

{The essence of those beings felled by this spear rests within it, awaiting more brethren}

Frankly, Scarlett had no idea what these did. She'd never used a bow or a spear in the game. If she were to guess, she'd sold them both immediately after getting them in her original playthrough. The descriptions also didn't help much.

She turned to the next item.

**[Clasps of the Storm (Epic)]**

{Blessed by the spirit of winds, these simple accessories hide the fury of the storm}

A pair of round, white marbles with clamps at their ends. It didn't look like much, but they hefted a pretty considerable boost to aeromancy magic. She had been planning on getting something like it for Fynn before, but these were definitely more powerful than what she'd had in mind.

She examined the rest of the small space. There was a set of stairs that led up a tight stone passage to her left—the only way of getting out of here, now that the boss room had been closed off—but there were no more items. Still, this was a pretty hefty haul.

She looked back into the room behind her. Garside stood right outside the opening, and Allyssa was kneeling over by Shin and Rosa at the other end. Her gaze shifted to Fynn in his trance. She supposed that, technically, all of this loot belonged to him. But she was pretty sure he wouldn't complain even if she were to take it all. Still, she'd talk it over with him later. At the very least, she needed the [Fang of Remembrance].

She turned back to the line of items. Well, for now, she should gather these up. All the effects would have to be verified as well when they got back to Freybrook. For now, though, they should probably get out of this dungeon.