

## 92: Dark new shores

Scarlett watched the passing houses in silence as the carriage moved through the cobbled streets of central Freybrook, not paying much attention to the buildings themselves. She'd long since started growing used to the novelty of this medieval-like world.

It had been two days since they returned from Freymeadow.

The experience was a strange one, that was for sure. One many might describe as haunting. Not that she'd lost any sleep over it.

They had ended up only being able to enter Freymeadow one more time after witnessing the destruction of the village, which had been a shame. Scarlett would have liked it if she could stay for even longer. Still, that made six entries in total, which was more than she had been expecting to begin with. She should probably consider herself lucky she got that much.

If 'lucky' was the way to describe it.

The hidden little village had been a unique one, even in 'Chronicle of Realms'. And that much held true even here. From an outsider's perspective, the loop Freymeadow experienced every five days was hard to describe in words. Both in how it worked and in the dreadful end that awaited the village at the end.

Scarlett hadn't wanted any of the others to witness that sight or the reasons behind it. Yet, in the end, she'd still allowed Rosa to join, and even showed the woman the cyclical nature of the place.

The bard had taken it surprisingly well. Though, perhaps that was to be expected. Scarlett didn't know exactly what Rosa had gone through in the past, but some of it was bound to have been similarly gruesome as this, even if it wasn't of the same scale.

The woman had also been quick in realizing that none of the villagers remember what had happened in the previous loop. That went for Arlene as well.

Not that Scarlett's second attempt at convincing the woman to train her had gone much better than the first. And the single day of practice she'd had in Freymeadow before they had to leave hadn't given too much result. Next time they returned, things probably wouldn't be much different.

Still, Scarlett wouldn't stop her efforts just because of that. If there was one thing that Freymeadow afforded, it was time. If the system was what let her increase the power she had at her disposal, then Freymeadow was going to be what she used to hone that power until she could achieve her goals.

For now, though, things would have to continue as they were. Outside of Freymeadow, there were still a lot of things that had to be done.

She had spent the previous day performing some further practice—though not to the same extreme level as she could while in Freymeadow—and other preparations for the coming days.

One preparation had been ensuring that Evelyne had a room ready in the mansion if she decided to visit. The younger Hartford sister was supposed to return from the capital in a few days, and while Scarlett wasn't exactly looking *forward* to interacting more with the woman, it was a necessity for her continued operations as a baroness. She didn't exactly have the time or opportunity to learn how to be a real noble by herself at the moment.

The other preparations had been for the trip they were currently leaving on. Their destination this time was the city of Darkshore, closer to the eastern parts of the empire.

It was finally time for Scarlett to go and get the third piece of the Seal of Thainnith.

She had actually arranged this trip a while back, right after making the deal with the Hallowed Cabal. But she hadn't wanted to retrieve the third piece *too* early, in case the Cabal would just use that as an opportunity to attack her immediately after. It was best if she found it as close to their next meeting as possible. Though that was still over a week away, since she couldn't be sure exactly how long it would take to find the seal.

She was expecting anything from one to three days. Getting the seal itself shouldn't be too much of a problem. You could retrieve the third piece in the mid-game, when you were still around level 40, after all. The second piece was the hardest one to get. But that's why she sent the Cabal after it instead.

She wasn't particularly eager about traveling out into the Unresting Steppes and messing with the Undead Council.

But while getting the third piece was definitely easier, locating it could still be a bit tricky. Depending on how much the region has changed from the game.

She was hoping it wouldn't take too long, though. There were a few dungeons in the Darkshore area that had decent items. It'd be nice if she had the time to locate and clear those. Further expanding her repertoire of artifacts and equipment was always a good thing.

She glanced down at her current attire. It was the same dark travel clothes she usually wore for these excursions. But beneath that layer, hidden almost entirely by her shirt, was a set of interwoven green shirts. The [Garment of Form] they had looted from the Howling Gale's Haunt.

After having had its effects confirmed, Scarlett'd had it delivered to a tailor here in Freybrook who had experience working with enchanted equipment, and the man had been able to perform some minor alterations so that she could wear it. It was a bit hot, at times, wearing it as an underlayer beneath her normal clothes. But it worked. And while she wouldn't exactly call the piece of clothing ugly—it was actually rather elegant, in its own way—it was far too garish to bring herself to wear it when she had another option. This was one time she wasn't that annoyed at having the original Scarlett's sensibilities forced upon her.

In the end, what mattered was that she still got the item's effects. Which, to be exact, was a magical boost of one's agility and what essentially amounted to a short-range teleport. Of course, being an enchanted item of epic-tier, its defenses were also a notch higher than anything else Scarlett could bring to bear at the moment. She wasn't quite what its limit was—she somewhat doubted it would stop a sword going straight for her heart—but it was at least to the level where she couldn't tear the material apart with her hands, no matter how much she tried.

But its defensive qualities weren't the most important part, honestly. That was the last line of defense. An emergency measure, if everything else had failed. If it reached that point, she was probably already screwed. The magical defense she got from the [Sidhe's Flowing Garbs] skill was much more important in that regard.

The effects of the [Garment of Form] had been the main focus to begin with. The increase in agility when wearing it, for example, was pretty noticeable, and would probably be very helpful. And the short-range teleportation would probably be far better at saving her life than the ability to tank another strike or two. The best thing was that there was no upper limit on how many times she could use it per day. Instead, the [Garment of Form] had three charges that took about five minutes each to recharge.

It blew things like her [Wand of Fireball] out of the park. Though, granted, the [Wand of Fireball] was an early game item. Still, [Garment of Form] was a very nice item to have. And she wanted more like it.

She glanced to the side where Fynn sat, eyes turned out the carriage's other window. Though perhaps she wouldn't steal it from one of her companion's ancestral sites next time.

She turned back to watching the houses outside as they passed by. Eventually, their carriage reached the large circular square where Freybrook's Kilnstone was located. As usual, there were two lines on both sides of the marble structure at the center, both filled with people, carriages, and wagons of different kinds.

They drove over to the shorter of the lines, where they only had to wait for roughly fifteen minutes before it was their turn. The coachman steered the carriage onto the marked area in front of the floating Kilnstone, exchanged a few words with the people in uniform in charge, and soon enough the ancient artifact's reflective grey surface turned completely black as it was their turn to teleport.

All the surrounding light flowed into the tall obelisk, leaving them in a black void for a brief moment, before all the color was spat out once more as a new view appeared before them.

The city of Darkshore was one of the larger cities in the empire, built on the bank of a large lake that had a large volcano at its center. The volcano was known as the Resting Eye, and was—despite what one might expect—*not* dormant. And as far as Scarlett was aware, much of the lake surrounding it was inhabitable for wildlife, so the city itself relied on trade and produce from other nearby cities. Silverborough, for example—which was apparently referred to as the 'Sterling Breadbasket' of the empire, in the material she'd read—was only a day's travel away.

As their carriage exited from the busy square where Darkshore's Kilnstone was located, it became increasingly clear where the city had gotten its name from. The volcano itself didn't look much different from a normal mountain, a massive mass of grey jutting from the ground, but the thick smoke trailing from its tip was almost pure black.

Scarlett gazed at the sight. She couldn't imagine herself feeling comfortable living so close to a place like this—was smoke really supposed to leave it like that?—but the people here probably weren't expecting it to actually ever erupt. Supposedly, it had been mostly quiet for centuries, since before the empire was founded. There were also a lot of useful resources that they could gather from the volcano and its surroundings. The way she understood it, much of the city's economy was based around the gathering of those resources.

Still, that didn't change the fact that it was a ticking bomb.

Their carriage set out onto the city's streets, passing by some of the local markets and scenery as they traveled through the commercial district. Allyssa, Shin, and the others seemed enraptured by the view of the volcano in the distance, while Scarlett started paying more attention to the stores they were passing by.

In truth, she wasn't that familiar with Darkshore. Even in the game, she hadn't visited here as much as some of the other cities. And now that it was in real life she was essentially a stranger to this place, only having vague memories of what store went where. She had a much better recollection of the surrounding region and its dungeons.

None of the coachmen that were employed in her service—there were two of them: the older man who'd driven her around Ambercrest and Elystead, and the young man who often drove them around Freybrook—had been here before either. So, she was keeping her eyes open.

As they passed by a wide street where there appeared to be a lot of smaller stores and the like, Scarlett called out for the carriage to stop. The coachman pulled in near a small valley, mumbling some words to the horses as Scarlett exited. She told everyone but Shin to stay for now, before walking up to the first store she found that had some books visible through one of the windows.

A bell rang above the door as they entered, and Scarlett sent a few glances around the establishment. It looked like a relatively simple store, with wooden shelves hanging from the walls, holding a somewhat meager assortment of common-day items on them. A table stood in one of the corners, with a few books and pieces of rolled-up parchment placed on it.

Walking over along with Shin, she picked up one of the parchment and unfurled it. It seemed to be an old nautical chart of the nearby waters, though the detail of the work surprised her. It even included the depth and features of parts of the seabed, marking points of interest. Did they perhaps mine things underwater here? Or something along those lines? She doubted they saw much mercantile traffic on the lake.

"Is there something I can help you with?" a voice sounded out from the side.

Scarlett turned to look at the counter to her left, where a man had exited from a back room. He had a bald head and wore a simple brown jacket over a white shirt, with slightly chubby skin and an ill-shaven chin, his stubble half-covering a small mole.

He smiled as his eyes met hers.

Scarlett studied him.

“...Yes,” she said after a moment. He looked familiar. “I am searching for a map of the nearby region. Preferably one as detailed as this chart.”

“A map, you say?” The man looked at the parchment in Scarlett’s hands and the table in front of her. “Well, you have a couple there, but most of those are for traversing near the Eye.”

He rubbed his chin. “I might have something in the back, though. Wait just a minute,” he said, disappearing into the room he’d entered from.

Shin stepped up next to Scarlett, picking up one of the books on the table. “Where are we going?”

“To the mountainous regions to the east,” Scarlett said.

“For?”

“We will be searching for ruins.”

“As usual, then?”

“Indeed.”

Soon, the shopkeeper returned with a large piece of rolled-up parchment in his hand. He chuckled as he held it out towards Scarlett. “Used this one myself when I was younger, exploring the wide world. I was quite the daredevil, you know.”

”I am sure you were.” She received the parchment, stepping closer to roll it out on the counter. Like the nautical chart, this map was also of high quality. It even beat most of the maps she had back in Freybrook. The surrounding regions were all depicted in high detail, with names for all the notable landmarks and places. She studied it for a while, trailing her finger along a small hilly region that moved to the northeast, stopping as she found exactly what she was looking for. A small illustration of a statue.

If this map was actually correct, then they might not even have to waste any time looking for their destination.

She looked up at the shopkeeper. “What will you ask for this map?”

He seemed to consider it for a moment. “I think two hundred solars is fair.”

She arched a brow. Last time she bought a map, it had been for ten solars. Though that one had been of significantly lower quality than this map, and quite old. But, while their finances had taken a bit of a beating because of the recent damage to the mansion, it wasn’t as if she couldn’t afford things like this. Evelyne had sent over enough of the profits from the loot that had been sold to buy this map a hundred times over.

She pulled out the money from her [Pouch of Holding] and placed it on the counter in front of the man, then rolled up the map and handed it to Shin.

“Glad to do business with you,” the shopkeeper said with a wide smile.

Scarlett merely nodded at him and turned around to leave. Before she did, however, she noticed the words on the cover of the book in Shin’s hands.

*Tales and Accords of Darkshore — The Old Ways*

She frowned. That sounded a lot like it could have been a book from the game. In fact, the name felt familiar.

She stepped over to Shin, holding out her hand. “May I see that?”

He gave her a surprised look, before handing it over to her. She quickly flipped through its pages, skimming through its contents, then stopped at a particular page. She studied it for a moment, then closed the book and turned back to the shopkeeper. “I want this book as well.”

“Ah, fond of old fairy and folk tales are you?” The man sagely nodded his head. “My daughter was the same, before she decided she got too old for those sorts of things.”

He held up two fingers. “It’s yours for twenty solars.”

Scarlett pulled out the coins and placed them on the counter. The man quickly collected them.

Placing the book into her pouch, Scarlett was about to turn around to leave once more before she paused, glancing at the shopkeeper.

Had he maybe been an NPC in the game? If she’d visited this place in one of her playthroughs...

“You would not happen to have a certain problem that you require help dealing with?”

The man blinked, then his smile turned even wider as he rubbed his hands together. “Hah, what a coincidence. Actually, I *do* have a minor issue right now. You see, I recently ran out of Sprig Floret, and my back isn’t what it used to be so I can’t go and fetch more myself, but if you could—”

“I see. That is all I wanted to know.” Scarlett turned around and moved for the exit. Fetch quests were annoying enough in games.

“How’d it go?” Allyssa asked after they had climbed inside.

“Good,” Scarlett said as she sat down in her seat. “It appears as if our timetable will be moved forward.”