

235: Family reunion...?

The gondola eventually made a landing near the heart of the Rising Isle, where a central island featured a magnificent waterfall cascading into the network of waterways winding through the city. The island was adorned with numerous grand structures, each unique and intriguing in its own way.

One building appeared as though carved from a vast vein of pearly moonstone, ascending towards the heavens like a beacon. Another presented a stark contrast in its more—to Scarlett's sensibilities—'modern' appearance, reminiscent of a lofty clock tower adorned with a gleaming dial for a face. A third building combined elements of a palace and an aqueduct, with great spires and a large section that arched over to an adjacent island, diverting water from a waterfall there to nourish a magnificent fountain at its forefront.

The architecture bore a lot of the characteristics of Zuverian make, utilizing standard pale stone interspersed with elegant marble columns, yet it exhibited a lot more complexity and grandeur than your typical Zuverian ruin.

Scarlett observed her companions taking in the diverse surroundings with keen interest as their group followed Principal Wizard Bunce through a spacious plaza towards a particular building which was bustling with robed mages entering and exiting it. It was shaped like a dome and was probably large enough to fit several of Scarlett's mansion in Freybrook inside.

The Chamber of Conjunction was a unique location even here on the Rising Isle, since it was the only place where external magic could penetrate the Isle's defenses. It was also the place where the Kilnstones were located and where Scarlett's party *should* have arrived initially.

The detour hadn't been in Scarlett's plans, but she didn't mind it too much. If anything, it had served as a decent enough introduction to this place for her party.

As they crossed the island, Bunce explained the purpose and significance of the various buildings until they finally reached the Chamber of Conjunction. Once they entered it, they were met with a mess of various chambers filled to the brim with mages and other individuals, and Scarlett could barely make out what anyone was doing. Bunce quickly led them away from the central chambers as they ascended to the higher levels, navigating through intricately designed corridors that looked like they might have been fashioned straight out of a quarry, with stone veins seamlessly running through the floors and walls.

Eventually, they arrived at a small vestibule that had a broad window at the far end, framing another breathtaking waterfall flowing from a crescent-shaped structure carved into a cliffside amidst lush greenery.

The chamber featured a central arrangement of chairs and tables, set above a transparent floor showcasing a curious display of moving, flowing lights. The walls were adorned with sconces carrying emerald crystals that bathed the space in a soft, ethereal tone.

"Baroness, Grand Wizard Hartford will meet you here," Bunce informed her, motioning towards the empty chairs. "Regrettably, I hear he had to attend to some urgent business, though I don't know the details, but he should return shortly. One of the inconveniences of

our limited numbers can be that we are often pressed for people, and the services of wizards of his calibre are all the more occupied. This may differ from what you are used to on the mainland, but your understanding is appreciated.”

“Very well,” Scarlett responded in a neutral tone, watching Allyssa and Rosa wander across the room to the window.

It seemed like they hadn’t gotten enough of the sightseeing yet.

She turned to Bunce. “Would it be possible for us to explore more of the islands, beyond what was shown on our route here?”

The man appeared momentarily taken aback by her request before nodding. “Of course, that won’t be a problem, provided it’s only until the Grand Wizard arrives.” He gestured towards the two Associate Wizards accompanying him. “I will have to ask that these two escort you, however. They will be able to guide you to all the permitted areas.”

Scarlett turned to her companions. “Then you may all feel free to explore at your leisure.” She glanced at Bunce. “Time should not be an issue as long as I remain here, no?”

He blinked. “No, I suppose not.”

“You’re not coming?” Allyssa asked.

“I have already seen enough of the Isle for now,” Scarlett replied. “I prefer to conclude my meeting with the Grand Wizard first. Since I doubt it will be of interest to any of you, I thought you could take this opportunity to see what this place has to offer.”

Rosa looked at her, a questioning gaze in her eyes. “You sure?”

Scarlett met her violet eyes. “I am.”

The woman considered her for a moment longer, then shrugged. “Well, I won’t say no to seeing more of the sights. I’d always heard stories that others made about this place, but now I can make up my own without them being *pure* fabrications. This place certainly beats the gloom of Freybrook in winter, and I might even be able to cheer up some of the local mages with a song or two.”

“Please ensure that you don’t disrupt the work of our wizards,” Bunce interjected cautiously.

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” Rosa reassured him with a smile. “Music is the antithesis of ‘disturbing’, and I’m sure your cooped-up compatriots won’t complain.”

Bunce seemed uncertain whether he should say anything more, but after a brief consultation with his two junior wizards, he finally gave a reluctant nod. Rosa and Allyssa made to leave, along with the two wizards, while Fynn and Shin both appeared to stay put.

Scarlett allowed a faint smile as she looked at the two. “I believe I will be safe even without both of you here to protect me.”

Fynn's whole demeanor basically screamed "I'm staying", while Shin didn't show much of a reaction. The two of them exchanged looks, then Shin moved to follow Allyssa and Rosa, leaving with the Associate Wizards.

Scarlett focused on Fynn. "Are you not interested in exploring more of the Isle?"

He shook his head. "No. I'll have more chances later."

"That is true, I suppose." Scarlett turned to Bunce, who maintained a polite smile.

"I will also take my leave for the time being, Baroness. Your visit was rather sudden for us here on the Isle, so I need to ensure that your accommodations have been properly arranged. I'll return after your meeting with the Grand Wizard. Is there anything else you require before I go?"

"There is not."

"Excellent, excellent. Then I'll see you again shortly."

With that, Bunce also departed, leaving Scarlett and Fynn by themselves. Fynn paused for a moment, his gaze seemingly fixed on the see-through floor and the moving lights under it at the room's center, his brow furrowed in thought. Eventually, he chose to sit down quietly on the floor by the door, his eyes closed in meditation.

Scarlett watched him with slight amusement. Was the light show too much for his tastes?

Walking over to the chairs at the heart of the chamber, she chose one of the more comfortable-looking chairs and sat down, leaning back as she turned her attention to the scenery outside the window.

She had to admit, it might take some adjusting to get used to this place. She had grown so accustomed to living as a noble in the empire at this point, and the overall atmosphere and way people looked at her here on the Rising Isle was pretty different. Even Principal Wizard Bunce's efforts, while likely well-intentioned, fell short of the formalities she had experienced anywhere else.

The subtle missteps and demeanor *did* irk her slightly, but she was willing to tolerate it. She had been aware that the mages of the Rising Isle handled things differently even before she came here. This might even be a bit like how an interaction between a noble and most modern people would have played out.

And while her visit was primarily motivated by progressing Arlene's quest, she was also eager to explore some of the notable locations here on the Isle. The places she wanted to go to weren't the ones Rosa and the others were currently touring, though. No, she was more interested in those places she *wasn't* allowed to visit.

If she played her cards right, her status as an outsider wouldn't necessarily hinder her from doing so.

Much of that would hinge on her upcoming meeting with this ‘Grand Wizard Hartford’, however. She was curious about meeting him, given the name and his apparent status, but there was also a part of her that felt slighted at his mere existence.

Who was he to go around using *her* name?

She pushed those intruding thoughts as much as she could, her eyes moving to the entrance, as though the man in question would appear any second now.

He did not.

That was fine, though. She could be patient when necessary.

...Although it now dawned upon her that she had no idea how long she was actually expected to wait.

To occupy her time, she brought out a book and began reading, but as a few minutes turned to twenty without any sign of his arrival, her displeasure began to mount. She wondered if this was just how the Isle usually treated dignitaries.

Surely the Imperial Chancellery would have warned her if they expected her visit to be especially problematic in any way?

When her frustration began to reach a point where it was *slightly* challenging to keep it in control, a figure finally appeared at the entrance. A man, looking to be somewhere in his fifties, entered wearing a distinguished set of black robes. His features were sharp, suggesting he might have been a looker in his younger days, with styled, short black hair greying at the temples and a groomed beard. The gold trim of his collar shone brightly, and he leaned on an ornate black staff, topped with a striking gemstone, as he made his approach.

He stopped at the entrance, however, looking down at the motionless Fynn with a perplexed and gruff look, before shifting his gaze to Scarlett. “...You are Baroness Hartford, I presume?”

She nodded. “I am. And I presume you are Grand Wizard ‘Hartford’?”

“Simply call me Gaspar,” he replied, his expression easing slightly. “It will be easier that way.”

Scarlett studied him closely as he crossed the chamber. She had actually meant that more as a slight probe regarding his name, though she couldn’t tell if he’d caught that or not.

The man settled into the chair opposite her, placing his staff behind him, looking once more towards Fynn as if witnessing a particularly unruly rare beast.

“He is one of my retainers,” Scarlett explained, mostly managing to keep her voice neutral. “His manner may appear somewhat peculiar to those from the Rising Isle, but you do not need to pay him any mind. He often takes the opportunity to meditate when we are forced to wait for extended and undue periods of time.”

Gaspar raised both eyebrows but soon refocused on Scarlett. “Apologies for the delay. I would have been here sooner, but there were some unforeseen complications with one of my disciples’ research endeavours. It could have led to me being short one disciple, so I spent more time admonishing the fool than I had expected.”

Scarlett gave him a measured look, but she couldn’t detect any lie. “I see.”

This didn’t really change that she’d been waiting here for a while. He *could* have notified her about the delay, or at least informed Principal Wizard Bunce of the circumstances. She suspected that the man in front of her wasn’t placed in charge of outsiders like her very often. But he seemed to be making an effort at civility.

“The Isle has been buzzing with mentions of your name this past month, Baroness,” Gaspar continued after a pause. “If the rumors are to be believed, you supposedly possess insights into the Zuver that rival those of esteemed figures such as Arch Wizard Aubriane or Myerscough, heralding a new chapter in Zuverian research.” He shook his head, with the skepticism clear in his tone. “I won’t hold you to such inflated hyperbole. The junior wizards get so easily excited, even when there have only been two new discoveries of Zuverian sites. They forget that your background is of imperial nobility, not wizardry.”

Scarlett’s gaze sharpened slightly. “And what exactly are you suggesting with that?”

“I mean to say that, despite your collaborations with Master Docent Mendenhall of the Elystead Tower, you have yet to write any treatise or put out any substantial scholarly work for the academic community to review. Thus, skepticism is only natural regarding the validity and depth of your research. I would not claim to be a proficient administrator simply because I once headed a village, and the same applies here. Unless I am wrong in assuming that you are not a conventional scholar and researched in the field of Zuverian studies?”

Scarlett’s eyes remained locked on him for a few seconds. “...No, you are not.”

She wanted to be annoyed at him, but he did have a point.

“Then expecting scholarly contributions from you is hardly right, despite your key role in uncovering new sites of import,” Gaspar said with a deep breath. “This is why the council’s urgency in allowing your request to visit the Isle puzzled me. Though they are not all focused on Zuverian research as I am, it was strange nonetheless.”

Scarlett’s expression remained cool. “While I may not possess expertise that can rival individuals like yours, the tangible outcomes of my discoveries speak for themselves. From what I have heard, thanks to my recent efforts, more Zuverian relics have been uncovered in these last few months than in the last five years combined.”

“I don’t dispute the significance of your findings, Baroness. My concern lies with those who might over-interpret what those achievements mean, spitting in the face of many lifelong researchers.” The man sighed. “But my personal views are irrelevant now, and I will not put the burden of them at your feet. The council disregarded my vote on the matter and clearly values your contributions highly enough to sanction your visit, and as the appointed liaison, I will do my part.”

“...I respect your dedication, even if it comes with reluctance,” Scarlett said. “Should you find the task unsuitable, however, you could simply ask that the responsibility be assigned to someone else. I will not take offense, and I am confident that I can work with whomever is decided upon.”

“That is not how things are done here, Baroness. There was a reason I was chosen, regardless of my personal opinions. Now, let’s focus on the matter at hand rather than prolong unnecessary discussions.” He leaned forward, clasping his hands. “You have indicated that your findings in the Zuverian ruins east of Faybarrow that you uncovered along with Master Docent Mendenhall contain references to secrets yet to be unearthed on the Rising Isle. Given that you have now arrived here, it’s time to elaborate on what you meant by that. The prevailing assumption here on the Isle surrounding your visit was your intent to contribute to our current research endeavours in some way, but I do not find that particularly likely.”

“You are correct in assuming that is not my motivation.”

Scarlett’s pretext for visiting the Rising Isle involved alluding to possessing knowledge related to the Isle itself. Despite centuries of mage habitation, there were still several secrets and enigmas in this place, several of which were featured in the game, and so her claim wasn’t unfounded.

However, she had been deliberately vague about the specifics, aiming to assess what kind of freedom and access she would be given on the Isle before disclosing too much. Considering the potential value in anything related to the Zuver, she had been expecting the Isle’s mages to show interest almost regardless of what she offered.

“Before we proceed, I must ask you something,” Scarlett said.

“And what is that?”

“I would like to understand the scope of my permissions as an imperial envoy here. Specifically, what restrictions apply to my movements and access?”

A slight frown creased Gaspar’s brow. “Such information should already have been communicated to you.”

“Yes, but I was not given specifics. I understand that general access is granted under supervision, but I assume this excludes areas of significant interest, such as the Astral Sanctum, the Veiled Library, or the Halls of Echo?”

The man looked surprised. “I wouldn’t have thought you to even be aware of their existence, to be frank. Indeed, those locations remain off-limits, even with an escort.”

“What if I told you that I possessed knowledge that could unlock secrets you were not even aware of in one of those places?” Scarlett asked.

Gaspar regarded her with a contemplative silence for a few seconds before responding. “Should that be the case, the council would have to convene to consider whether it’s feasible to grant you temporary access. The possibility of such a scenario was considered when we first handled your original request, and I know that they might at least be willing to allow you

inside the Veiled Library, but I cannot guarantee the same for the other locations. Before I can even relay your request, I must know which location in particular you are referring to and why you want to go there.”

Scarlett made a show of considering her response for a moment. “My interest lies in the Astral Sanctum. I prefer to withhold the exact reason until I can receive a preliminary approval, however. I understand the value of what I am offering.” Seeing the man’s frown grow, she added, “Suffice it to say that I have reason to believe there remain parts of the Sanctum that are undiscovered.”

“Ridiculous.”

“Not at all.”

“...I do not particularly like working with those who keep secrets, Baroness, but I will present your request to the other members of the council,” the man eventually said.

“When should I anticipate their decision?” Scarlett asked.

“The earliest you can expect an answer would be tomorrow. A majority of the council members will need to convene for a matter like this.”

If that was the case, then Scarlett should probably be happy that they *only* needed one day. Given wizards’ notoriety for immersing themselves in their own research and ignoring secular matters, gathering enough of them on such short notice felt like it could be a challenge. The Rising Isle’s council had fifteen members, comprising all their Grand Wizards as well as their three Arch Wizards, representing probably one of the most formidable assemblies of pure magical might in this world.

“Then I will await their decision until tomorrow,” Scarlett said.

“Is there anything else you wish me to communicate to them?”

“My request to access the Astral Sanctum is the primary matter. However, I would not be opposed to the council discussing extending additional access privileges based on the potential value of my findings in the Sanctum. Such collaborations would almost undoubtedly prove immensely beneficial to both parties.”

“...We’ll take it under advisement.” Gaspar gave her one last look, then moved as if he was about to take his leave.

“There is another matter,” Scarlett said.

He paused, returning his attention to her. “Yes? And what is that?”

Scarlett crossed her arms. “It cannot have passed your notice that we share a name.”

A scoff escaped the man. “No, it has not.”

“This has caught my...interest. The Hartford barony has been around since the empire was founded, and so there have been several branches of it over the generations. Do you perhaps hail from one of these?”

Gaspar suddenly looked at her with a mix of disbelief and incredulity. “Surely you would know that better than anyone, Baroness? You imperial nobles are those who are obsessed with lineage.”

“While I have considerable knowledge of my family’s history, it does not encompass every branch, especially not those potentially far-flung. I am not aware of any connections to the Rising Isle, hence my inquiry.”

“And what if I tell you that we bear no relation?”

Scarlett studied him. Annoyingly, that bothered her more than if he’d said there *was* a relation.

“Is that truly the case?” she asked, her voice coming out a bit more confrontational than she had intended.

The intensity of her inquiry did not seem to be lost on the man. “Baroness, do not think that our shared name imposes any obligations between us.”

Scarlett’s expression hardened. “That was not my implication.”

Gaspar’s demeanor also worsened, but instead of replying, he fell silent, observing her for a few seconds before shaking his head. “To answer your question properly, no, my family has no link to your house. My ancestors have been established on the Rising Isle for generations. If our shared surname intrigues you, I suggest you investigate it from your end. It is none of my business.”

Standing up, he adjusted his robe and collected his staff. With a more formal tone, he added, “If there’s nothing more, I’ll relay the council’s decision tomorrow, hopefully. Should they approve, I will likely be accompanying you to the Astral Sanctum as well. Meanwhile, I believe Principal Wizard Bunce was responsible for managing any other inquiries or needs during your first days here. Direct any specific questions or requests to him, unless they pertain directly to your visit’s purpose.”

Scarlett watched him for a moment, brow creased, then nodded. “That will be all for now.”

She felt like there was more to the story, but clearly, she wouldn’t be getting anywhere with him right now. It was a shame, because she had also intended to inquire with him about details related to Arlene’s quest, but it seemed better to consult someone more receptive about that.

Grand Wizard Gaspar Hartford bid his goodbyes, passing by Fynn next to the entrance and taking his leave. A short while after his departure, Fynn opened his eyes, looking at Scarlett.

“You’re good at making people angry,” the young man said.

“...Go back to your meditation,” Scarlett replied.

She turned back to gaze out the window, allowing some of her own frustration to subside.

She might have let herself get a bit too carried away there, but Gaspar wasn't *too* bad. She'd dealt with worse.

She couldn't help but wonder why most of her first meetings with powerful wizards always seemed to start so unfavorably, though.