

Memoirs 240: Politics

Later in the evening, following their exploration of the Astral Sanctum and its hidden dungeon, Scarlett found herself in the communal space of their accommodations, joined by her party. They were gathered around a secluded low table, the others engaged in heated conversation. Allyssa and Rosa, in particular, seemed keen on interrogating Fynn about the events in the Sanctum, while Scarlett had her attention focused on the object in her hand.

[Orrery of Dissonant Convergence (Unique)]

{Crafted through ancient artifice long since forgotten, this mysterious device resonates with hidden energies beyond the veil of the mundane world}

Since neither Gaspar nor any of the other wizards had seemed to even notice its existence, Scarlett had ended up keeping the artifact for herself in order to figure out what it was.

Its mechanism was still peculiar to her. The encased metal globe set at the center of its face didn't seem to have any clear function, but the two pointers on its outer bezel still made her curious. When she aligned the longer pointer towards nothing in particular, the shorter pointer remained mostly stationary. However, aiming the longer pointer in—for example—Shin and Allyssa's direction caused the shorter pointer to pivot and move, its motion slightly shaky. This reaction was roughly as pronounced as it had been with Gaspar.

Directing it towards Fynn, though, the shorter pointer moved almost twice the distance, quivering more noticeably. When aimed at Rosa, it shot all the way to the midpoint of the bezel, trembling intensely.

These responses had been consistent over several tests now, creating a clear pattern, though Scarlett was still piecing together its significance.

She turned the Orrery towards herself, and the short pointer rotated all the way around back to its starting point, vibrating uncontrollably as if struggling to maintain position.

Even if she couldn't be sure yet, she *did* have some inklings.

Scarlett's contemplation was interrupted by Rosa's voice as the bard addressed her. "What's got you wearing your thinking hat with such a serious face?" She shifted her attention to the woman, who seemed to have momentarily left the questioning of Fynn to Allyssa to observe Scarlett with a curious gaze.

After a brief pause, considering Rosa's curiosity, Scarlett presented the bracelet in her hand. "Can you tell me what this is?" she asked.

At first glance, Rosa's eyebrows rose with a hint of confusion, looking at the artifact as if she had just noticed its existence. "...A rock, maybe? You sure seem to have a penchant for collecting those."

"As usual, Miss Hale, your assessment is far from accurate."

Rosa shrugged with a non-affected smile. “Can’t fault a girl for trying, at least. So, what is it, actually?”

Offering the Orrery to her, Scarlett said, “Why not examine it yourself?”

Rosa accepted the strange metal bracelet, turning it over in her hands without seeming to notice anything special.

Scarlett observed her reaction closely. That was fascinating. The woman didn’t even seem to register that its shape bore no resemblance to a rock or anything like that.

After almost a full minute of examination, Rosa’s expression shifted, her eyes widening slightly as she stared at the artifact. “Whoa, that is bizarre,” she muttered.

Unintentionally, she managed to align the long pointer towards herself, causing the short pointer to move. Rosa paused upon seeing that, appearing thoughtful for a moment, before finally turning back to Scarlett. “Alright, so it’s not a rock. Can’t rightly say I have any better guess than it being a nifty bracelet, though. What does the pointy thingies mean?”

“I am still exploring that myself,” Scarlett answered, taking the artifact back.

At least it seemed like the Orrery wasn’t *entirely* invisible to others’ attention. That said, Scarlett had been carrying it around Gaspar for a lot longer than Rosa had been examining it just now, and that hadn’t made much of a difference for him.

“Miss Astrey, Mister Thornthon,” she began, interrupting the conversation between the two Shielders and Fynn. She presented the artifact to them. “Are any of you able to tell what this is?”

Their reactions were a blend of puzzlement and curiosity, with even Fynn appearing slightly perplexed. From their expressions, it took them a couple of moments simply to register what she was asking. When their eyes moved to the Orrery, their confusion seemed to deepen.

“A...rock?” Allyssa ventured hesitantly, as if afraid Scarlett would fail her.

Shin nodded along. “It looks like a rock.”

Fynn, however, simply shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Placing the item on the table, she encouraged them to look closer. “Examine it again and see if your answer remains the same.”

The trio scrutinized it more intently, each taking turns to touch and feel it. Despite their effort, even after a couple of minutes, none of them seemed to see through whatever illusion was placed on the artifact. Fynn’s deep frown hinted that he could sense there was something off about the ‘rock’, but that was it.

“Okay, I give up,” Allyssa eventually declared, looking back at Scarlett. “Are we supposed to notice something special here, or is this one of those trick questions?”

Scarlett took back the bracelet, laying it on the table before her. “There *is* something unique about this item, rest assured. I have yet to verify precisely what that is, but I have been able to confirm that its true appearance remains hidden from most.”

She was still wondering whether it was an item from the game or not. The notion of discovering a game item so casually discarded on a dungeon floor felt weird, though she supposed it wasn’t impossible. Something could have happened in this world that altered its placement. The fact that it was given a description by the system seemed to suggest, but there had been instances where objects not belonging to the game held the same privilege.

She was relatively certain that if it *had* been an item in the game that she had encountered, she would have remembered it by now.

However, if it wasn’t a game item, its existence raised a bunch of other questions. What was its purpose, and why was it considered important enough for the system to point it out like this? *Why* couldn’t others perceive it as well as she could?

A sharp knock halted her in her thoughts, drawing everyone’s attention to the room’s entrance as a young wizard clad in grey robes entered. “Pardon me, Baroness, but Magister Penney has arrived wishing to see you, if you’re available.”

Oh?

Scarlett supposed she did have a couple of things to discuss with him, so this was good. The mystery that was the Orrery could wait for a bit longer.

“I will be there shortly,” she said, rising from her seat and picking up the Orrery. She looked at the others around the table. “I suggest you do not wait for me before eating supper.”

If ‘Hugbert’ was here, it was likely he’d offer to dine with her after whatever conversation they were about to have. While his overt friendliness was a bit too much for Scarlett’s taste, she would admit that their previous meal together the evening before had been pleasantly tolerable.

She followed the young wizard out of the room and down the hallway to a familiar side-chamber where she had met with the Magister before. There, she found the rotund but jovial man awaiting her with a wide smile.

“Baroness Hartford! I heard about the expedition’s results from Gaspar, and I must say, your achievements have certainly lived up to your reputation!”

“Magister Penney,” Scarlett greeted him with a nod, but the man quickly corrected her.

“Please, call me Hugbert,” he insisted.

Scarlett maintained a polite expression on her face.

She was *not* calling him Hugbert.

Taking a seat opposite the man, Scarlett still had the Orrery in her hands, gauging if he paid any notice of it. When he didn't, she casually moved its long pointer towards him to observe its reaction.

The short pointer barely moved at all, similar to how it was with most wizards here. Seeing that, Scarlett stowed the artifact away in her [Pouch of Holding], focusing her attention solely on Magister Penney.

The wizard's expression held more than its fair share of excitement on it. "Word of what you found under the Sanctum has spread like wildfire across the Isle, Baroness. Such a discovery hasn't been made here in generations. A nexus for the Isle's Etheric wards and defences, I hear. Most exciting!"

"I am pleased to see my findings have as much impact on the Rising Isle as I anticipated."

"Oh, even more so, I would think." Hugbert responded with a light chuckle. "Certain members of the council are already buzzing about what demands you might make in exchange for such a boon and any other secrets you might unveil. I just came from an urgent meeting where Gaspar shared his preliminary findings, and there was no end to the debate surrounding the significance of your contributions."

"I can imagine," Scarlett said.

The man's demeanor grew more somber. "Indeed. I doubt there is anyone who would think to argue with the value of what you have offered us now. However...despite this, it seems as though the council is still hesitant to approve your request to access our archives for that investigation of yours."

Scarlett stared at him. "Surely you cannot be serious?"

"I am afraid that I am."

"...That is absurd."

She was basically offering them a golden opportunity on a silver platter. How could they *not* want that?

"I agree. But when the topic was first brought up this morning, it was deferred until we had seen the accuracy of your claims, and now that we have, it became a matter of vote. Unfortunately, four Grand Wizards as well as Arch wizard Newbury voted against granting you access simply due to your status as an imperial noble. Grand Wizard Hartford, too, opposed it and persuaded two other councilors to side with him, securing a majority against your request."

Scarlett didn't get it. Did Gaspar really have something against her personally?

"Am I to understand that the council is *unwilling* to collaborate with me further, even after I have demonstrated the value of my findings?" she asked, her tone sharp.

Magister Penney offered a sympathetic, albeit uneasy, smile. “Regrettable as it is, politics sometimes infiltrate even the Isle. Some council members likely view this as an opportunity to protest or force some form of negotiation. While I don’t believe Gaspar intends to squander the chance you’ve offered us, he appears to be seeking a compromise of sorts. After having opposed your request, he suggested that he would take it upon him to carry out whatever investigation you were interested in himself, promising to provide you the same results without compromising our archives.”

Scarlett frowned. “And what would the council do if I simply refuse to compromise?”

Hugbert sighed. “Us wizards have always been a stubborn sort, even when it is to our detriment. I suspect the others won’t budge so easily. However, even if you were not given access to any of our records, you can be rest assured you would be compensated appropriately, nonetheless.”

“Compensating me would involve granting my request,” Scarlett said.

The man’s expression wavered slightly as if he was searching for the right words, and eventually, he adopted an earnest tone. “While it may not seem ideal, Grand Wizard Hartford is among the Isle’s most esteemed researchers, deeply familiar with our historical archives. Enlisting his assistance might actually offer the most efficient route to the information you seek. Furthermore, though he can be obstinate, Gaspar remains a man of integrity, so he would be unlikely to betray your trust.”

Scarlett reclined in her seat as she considered his argument.

To be completely honest, she didn’t like it. This whole thing felt like an affront against her, the kind that merited an aggressive response. Yet she also recognized that those thoughts mostly originated from her character traits, and that any impulsiveness on her end here was neither wise nor mature.

And when she actually thought about it, Hugbert’s words *did* carry some weight. It wasn’t like her investigation into Arlene’s brother was some grand secret. Letting Gaspar conduct it on her behalf might not be such a disadvantageous arrangement. Should he fail to deliver, she would have enough reasons to raise concerns. Should he succeed, it freed her time for other pursuits on the Isle.

Viewing it from that perspective, accepting this compromise might really serve her interests better.

But acknowledging this didn’t really ease her dissatisfaction. No matter how you sliced it, this *was* still the council looking down on her because of who she was. While she didn’t want to provoke them directly over this issue, she would at least be determined to ensure they paid out of their pockets for her annoyance.

“I will take some time to consider this proposal,” Scarlett said eventually. “However, I hope the council understands that I am not one who appreciates being pressured when negotiating. Especially when I have already extended considerable leniency with what I have offered on my end.”

The man before her offered a knowing smile. “Your point is well taken, and that’s precisely why I’m here. I trust we’ll find mutual ground that satisfies both parties. I imagine that Gaspar will discuss this matter with you formally and in more detail tomorrow, so perhaps you can convey your decision then.” His eyes sparkled with interest. “Before that, perhaps you would be willing to share some clues about what further secrets you hold about our Isle? There has been quite some speculation among us council members, and I’m hardly immune to curiosity.”

Scarlett offered him a measured smile. “For now, you will have to be patient. Should I agree to this proposal, I will present Grand Wizard Hartford with a list tomorrow, outlining my conditions for sharing any additional insights. If the council deems my terms acceptable, then we can proceed further.”

Hugbert’s expression momentarily betrayed his disappointment, but his cheerful demeanor returned not long after. “Understandable enough, I suppose. I certainly can’t blame you for being shrewd, Baroness.” He laughed to himself, tapping the arm of his chair. “Although, perhaps over dinner, I might coax at least some of those secrets from you, hmm?”

“...That is unlikely,” Scarlett replied.

“Well, in that case, we’ll simply have to stick to more conventional topics of conversation for now,” he conceded with a hint of amusement, preparing to rise. “Speaking of which, you never did finish the story about your visit to that grove harboring a gateway to an interstitial space connecting to the Wandering Realm...”