

## 242: Naturals

"I presented Grand Wizard Hartford with my response this morning," Scarlett informed Magister Penney in a steady tone. The man sat opposite her in a spacious armchair, his gaze locked onto her with keen interest. "I trust that he will bring it before the council without delay. My terms are rather comprehensive, so I sincerely hope that you will give it thoughtful consideration before coming to a decision."

The evening had set in, cloaking the room they were in a dim light as the lone chandelier above them illuminated the space.

"I look forward to reviewing it with the rest of the council, then," Hugbert said earnestly. "Should I anticipate any particular point of interest?"

"Everything proposed should be well within the Isle's means," Scarlett replied.

He chuckled lightly. "That could still encompass a broad spectrum of things, but alright. I'm optimistic that we can forge a satisfactory compromise for your continued collaboration eventually."

"That is my preference as well." Scarlett paused briefly to scrutinize him. "With that settled, there is something else I wished to ask you about. Do you recall the wizard I inquired about during our first initial meeting?"

"The Senior Wizard, you mean?"

"Yes. I spotted her again yesterday, participating in the Astral Sanctum's investigation, and our paths crossed yet again today. It strikes me as remarkable that we have encountered each other three times already in my short span here."

The magister's expression shifted subtly, a corner of his mouth twitching upward.

Scarlett held his eyes for a few seconds. "...Unless memory fails me, you claimed not to know her personally."

The portly man straightened in his seat, clearing his throat. "Ah, yes, I did say that, didn't I?"

"However, I have since discovered that to not be the case," Scarlett pressed on.

Hugbert fell silent, then, after a short while, he sighed. "It seems she has once again disregarded any efforts I make to simplify matters for her." He offered an apologetic smile. "I am sorry for not being entirely forthright on the matter. I am indeed familiar with Senior Wizard Yamina. But my silence was not meant to deceive you specifically. Rather, it could reflect somewhat poorly on her if it was made known that she had made clandestine contact with you in the manner I suspect she has."

"And why is that?" Scarlett asked.

"Well, there are several reasons," the man explained. "For one, the duty has been designated to Grand Wizard Hartford, and any interference with that duty will be frowned upon. While the council

knows of and largely accepts my meeting with you, Yamina's involvement is a concern due to her history of causing, let's say, disruptions with those from outside the Isle."

"I do not mind."

Hugbert's smile became awkward. "The council might."

Scarlett wondered what actions Yamina might have taken that led to such cautiousness. The woman didn't strike her as someone who would do something *too* crazy. Although, she supposed that her method and motivations for approaching Scarlett *had* been pretty...direct.

"If I might ask, who is she? I find it difficult to believe that she is simply another Senior Wizard, given how she acts and the ease with which she seemed to locate me on the Isle."

The magister seemed to consider her for a bit, weighing his response.

"Do you know her actual title?" he finally asked.

"I imagine it would be 'Senior Wizard Ward'?"

The man nodded. "Exactly, though she herself often prefers to go by her first name. Now, have you heard of any other with the name 'Ward' here on the Rising Isle?"

Scarlett's brow knitted slightly as she considered his question. The name didn't stand out at first, but maybe there was something...

"Was there not a previous arch wizard on the Isle that went by that name?"

She seemed to remember seeing that name when she was reading up on the Rising Isle before. It wasn't something she thought of immediately, however, since it hadn't been pertinent to her game knowledge.

"There was indeed," Hugbert confirmed. "Senior Wizard Yamina is Arch Wizard Ward's daughter."

Scarlett had to admit that she didn't quite expect that.

"Arch Wizard Ward was a wizard of exceptional skill and character, rare even among those mages who reach that vaunted level," the magister continued. "Though the Rising Isle has never officially had a single leader, he was, in many respects, the guiding force during his time. Yamina, being his daughter, received considerable attention and benefits while she was still young, unlike most on the Isle."

Scarlett arched a brow. "I would have thought such nepotism would not be well-received here."

"In most cases, it wouldn't. But Yamina was an exceptional case, undoubtedly deserving of such attention. From a young age, she exhibited magical prowess and insights far beyond her peers, astounding even seasoned wizards with her abilities. The Isle hadn't witnessed such a prodigious talent in decades, leading many to believe she would surpass even her father in greatness."

Scarlett's brow furrowed. "If she possesses such expertise, why then is she merely a senior wizard?"

If the woman was at the level where she even had the respect of people like Dean Godwin, then remaining a senior wizard seemed strange.

“A question I’m sure is asked by many of us as well, I’m sure.” Hugbert’s expression grew introspective. “Hmm. The best way I can put it, I suppose, is that attaining the position of something like a principal or grand wizard involves more than raw talent or knowledge. At the very least, it requires some combination of dissertational work, participation in academic and scholarly discourse, mentoring apprentices and disciples, among other responsibilities. Additionally, while the primary focus of the Rising Isle is the advancement of magical knowledge, a certain level of combat prowess is also valued. Despite Senior Wizard Yamina’s undeniable skill, her specialization has always been in divination and inquiries about the composition of spellcrafts. Along with her disinterest in many of the conventional formalities and responsibilities associated with a higher position, there simply has not been much reason to give her another title. Moreover, her frequent excursions outside the Rising Isle on independent, unsanctioned projects have led to some friction between her and certain members of the council.”

Scarlett folded her arms as she listened to his explanation. It sounded like Yamina was similar to Dead Godwin in more ways than just her interest in Scarlett. Perhaps it made sense that they seemed to be friends, despite the apparent age difference.

Still, it felt like all of this wasn’t *quite* enough to explain everything she had learned about the woman. “There must be more to her story. As you have made clear, she is no ordinary senior wizard.”

“There is, yes.” The magister scratched his chin. “Yamina *is* only a senior wizard, but she also happens to be the leading authority in her field. That expertise means that she has accepted some responsibilities and is granted some freedoms atypical for her rank. For instance, she oversees several of the larger projects at the Mistral Observatory and is even permitted to attend council meetings as its representative.”

“And how many other wizards enjoy such privileges?”

“None.”

“So, she essentially holds a position akin to that of a council member.”

“There are those who have drawn such parallels,” Hugbert said. “Technically, she lacks any formal voting rights, but she is free to express her views, even though she seldom does.”

A small frown creased Scarlett’s brow. To her, it sounded like Yamina was basically an unofficial grand wizard, or perhaps even an arch wizard.

Though she had never made much of an appearance in the game.

“Does this imply she also wields similar influence to an official council member?” Scarlett asked.

“In part. Although I happen to know that Yamina often views these as more of a hindrance than a privilege.”

Scarlett somehow doubted that giving her access to protected areas like the Veiled Library was included among those privileges Yamina had. Nevertheless, it was intriguing to learn all of this about the woman. Though she didn't turn out to be who Scarlett thought she was, she was far from a straightforward figure.

As silence fell, Hugbert's gaze on her sharpened. "...Should I perhaps be concerned about your interest in Yamina and whatever it is that she sought you out regarding?"

Scarlett faced him with a completely neutral expression.

"No," she said calmly.

Whether her reply did much to assuage his worries was another matter entirely.



Later that day, Scarlett and her companions were convened in the communal space of their lodgings. Scarlett's discussion with Magister Penney continued for a while longer until he eventually had to leave to deal with his own commitments, this time not having time to invite her for a meal. To Scarlett, it didn't matter much either way.

As night approached, she stood in front of her party members, surveying them all.

Each of them was fully equipped, appearing as though they were about to clear a dungeon any moment now. In a way, they were.

Shin was clad in the bluish-grey armor complete with a shield Scarlett had provided, and Fynn had donned the bracers and assorted protective gear. Allyssa and Rosa were draped in their enchanted cloaks, the latter busily tying the former's hair into a ponytail behind her head.

"It's a shame that with all this time spent coming up with spells to blow up monsters and teleport around the world, no one bothered creating one for these daily conveniences," the bard said with a sigh, securing Allyssa's blonde hair into the tail and stepping back.

Shin glanced over at them. "I think there are spells like that."

Allyssa adjusted the last stray locks of her hair, then positioned her goggles atop her head, facing Shin. "Well then, why don't you learn them? I wouldn't mind having a personal attendant for things like that."

Shin shot her an unimpressed look before turning to Scarlett. "So, when are we leaving?"

"Shortly," Scarlett replied, glancing at a clock on the wall. It should be any moment now.

As if on cue, the center of the room erupted in a flash of light only a few seconds later, revealing a figure in emerald robes carrying an ornate pocket watch with a radiant crystal in her hand.

Yamina greeted Scarlett. "Baroness."

"Senior Wizard Yamina," Scarlett acknowledged.

"Oh, it's the 'props' lady," Rosa said.

The wizard nodded, her purple hair swaying lightly. "That's me."

Allyssa wore a puzzled expression. "'Props' lady?"

"She uses props," Rosa clarified.

"No, I got that, but like, what?"

"The introductions can wait until later," Scarlett interrupted them, focusing on Yamina. "Is everything ready?"

"It is," the woman said. She brought out a circular disc from her robes, no larger than a dinner plate, placing it on a nearby table. Its surface was etched with numerous runes and gems, emitting a soft glow as it seemed to cast a protective aura over the room.

"With this, your departure will remain unnoticed," Yamina explained, looking down at the pocket watch in her hand. "Now, if you would all gather around."

Scarlett gestured for the others to do so, and the group formed a circle around the wizard.

Yamina then looked up at Scarlett with a slight smile. "Off to the Veiled Library, then?"

"To the Veiled Library," Scarlett confirmed.

The woman activated the artifact in her hand, and a radiant light enveloped the group as they left for their destination.