

## 236: Hitting the books

After Scarlett's meeting with Grand Wizard Gaspar Hartford, she and Fynn waited until the rest of their party returned from their exploring. Eventually, Principal Wizard Bunce also arrived, having finalized arrangements for Scarlett's stay.

"I hope that everything will be up to your standards," the man said as they began to exit the meeting room.

"I trust that it will," Scarlett replied coolly. Her earlier frustrations had mostly subsided, though she'd be lying if she said there wasn't some lingering dissatisfaction from her meeting with Gaspar.

"If not, we could always pitch up a tent and camp out under the stars," Rosa chimed in cheerfully. "Sing a song and keep each other warm."

Bunce laughed awkwardly, as if uncertain whether she was serious or not.

Scarlett glanced at the bard, who shot her a smile. Rosa was probably trying to lighten the mood for her.

"So, how was your discussion with Grand Wizard Hartford, Baroness?" Bunce asked, adjusting his collar and refocusing on Scarlett. "I hope you reached a satisfactory agreement regarding your stay."

"We came to an understanding," Scarlett answered. "The Grand Wizard will present my proposal to the council, and we will see how things unfold from there."

The man's eyes widened slightly at that. "He's taking it directly to the council?"

"He is, yes."

"I...understand. I will admit, that is quite surprising. However, if that's the case, your afternoon appears to be open. Now that your accommodations are ready, you're welcome to check into them at your convenience. Alternatively, I can personally guide you around the Isle to any places you may be interested in. I'd particularly suggest the Mistral Observatory or the Crystal Sanctum."

"Oh, we went to the Crystal Sanctum," Allyssa chimed in. "It was that huge white tower we saw outside. Inside was even more spectacular — like stepping into another realm."

Scarlett nodded. "I appreciate the suggestion, Principal Wizard Bunce, but I believe I will postpone any such visits for another time. Instead, I had been curious about meeting with an associate of an acquaintance of mine. Would you happen to know a Magister Penney?"

Bunce's eyebrows lifted. "Magister Penney? Of course. He might be busy during the day, however, but I can send him a message to arrange a meeting for you."

“Please do,” Scarlett said. According to Adalicia, the man had already agreed to assist her a bit. “Meanwhile, I am interested in seeing the Arcanum Spire, if possible. Is that part of the locations I can visit with an escort?”

“Certain sections of it, yes.”

“In that case, I would like to start there. You made it sound very fascinating earlier, and I have heard much about the Isle’s collection of manuscripts and texts. It will be intriguing to experience it firsthand.”



Scarlett exhaled softly, setting aside the hefty volume she had been studying next to a tall stack of assorted tomes, scrolls, and other documents that cluttered the right side of the table. She then reached for a new book from a separate collection to her left, immediately beginning to skim through its pages.

“I found two more,” Allyssa’s voice reached her from the side as the young Shielder approached, placing two scrolls atop the expanding mound on the left. “I think these two are actually about mythical creatures, but they seemed to mention things from before The Severance.”

“Thank you, Miss Astley,” Scarlett replied as the girl turned around and left down a hallway of bookshelves.

Across from Scarlett, Rosa picked up another volume from the pile, donning an unusually serious demeanor as she began looking through it. Scarlett gave her a brief glance before diving back into her own book.

They were currently situated inside the Arcanum Spire, in one of the less restricted sections devoted to the historical texts amassed by the wizards of the Rising Isle over generations.

The interior of the Arcanum Spire was dominated by a single grand atrium, bathed in a mix of natural sunlight filtering through the see-through ceiling and the soft glow from whimsical, floating orbs of light spread around the place. At the heart of the atrium was a single, large crystal orb suspended in mid-air, ever-changing and displaying various natural landscapes, some clearly not belonging to this realm.

They had settled on one of the third floors overlooking the main space. Here, shelves brimming with ancient tomes, scrolls, and magically imbued artifacts climbed to the ceiling. The area was interspersed with long reading tables, flanked by busts and portraits of renowned wizards.

In this section, Scarlett and her companions had claimed a quiet corner for their work. Currently, Scarlett and Rosa were the only ones here, with Allyssa and Shin combing through the area for relevant material.

Further down the table, Bunce was engrossed in his own studies, subtly keeping an eye on Scarlett's so they weren't going anywhere they weren't allowed. The two Associate Wizards were watching Shin and Allyssa.

Initially, Scarlett had suggested that Allyssa and the others continue exploring the Isle while she visited the Spire. However, to her surprise, they had all insisted on coming with and assisting with her research, claiming that they'd already seen enough of this place for now.

Thus, Rosa was now seated opposite her, absorbed in some treatise on Zuver architecture, while Allyssa and Shin scoured for more literature even tangentially related to the subjects Scarlett had specified.

Fynn was the sole member of the group who wasn't engaged in the research efforts, sitting quietly in a corner, deeper inside. He had himself admitted to not being good with books, and while he could read, he had little to no experience in any kind of literature research. Instead, he was meditating, communing with his ancestors as he often did lately.

Scarlett frowned slightly as she continued to leaf through her current volume, soon concluding that it likely didn't hold any relevance to her and setting it aside.

Frankly, she wasn't holding out much hope for finding anything particularly groundbreaking here. After all, the topic she was researching was the Anomalous One.

Her conversation with Anguish a few weeks back had revealed that even gods were largely in the dark about the true nature of the entity trapped by the Seal of Thainnith. The key to learning more about it likely lay with the ones responsible for its confinement, which in this case meant the Zuver. In particular, Thainnith himself.

Of all the locations Scarlett knew about, only two seemed like they could reasonably hold records left behind by him. The first was Beld Thylelion, which was presently beyond her reach, and the other was her current location — the Rising Isle.

She couldn't be *certain* that there was anything here, but she at least had to look now that she was here.

Still, the Arcanum Spire probably wasn't where she would find what she sought. If there was information relevant to her inquiry on this island, it was much more likely to be hidden inside the Veiled Library. But with time at her disposal, it wouldn't hurt to comb through what she could of the Spire as well. While the knowledge about the Anomalous One seemed obscure in this world—from what she knew, even people like Dean Godwin hadn't heard about it—that didn't mean there couldn't be references to it that those unaware would overlook.

Although, judging from the three hours of diligent research that Scarlett and the others had already performed, she was leaning towards there not being much of note here. Or if there was, it was hard to find. Despite uncovering lots of fascinating facts about the Zuver in general, there had been not even as much as a hint about what the Anomalous One was.

“This one’s funny,” Rosa remarked in front of her, showing a passage from her book. “Apparently, the Zuver had specific chambers simply for whispering to each other. ‘Whisper Chambers’, they were called. Their elite often used them for all kinds of conspiracies and clandestine gatherings. Can’t help but respect their commitment to the bit.”

Scarlett looked over at the passage. “...That is incorrect. The Whispering Chambers were acoustic rooms designed to allow natural elements like wind to produce music or carry the spoken words of a teacher throughout a complex. They had nothing to do with conspiracies or the like. I suggest you abandon that book and proceed to the next. It clearly is not trustworthy.”

She had actually learned about that herself a while back when she had been reading up on the Zuver. It reminded her of certain historical misconceptions that were normal back in her world as well.

“Really? That’s far less interesting,” Rosa said.

Scarlett raised a brow at the woman. “I beg to differ. The presence of chambers engineered to educate and entertain carries far more interesting implications for their society at large.”

Rosa shrugged. “I suppose you’ve got me there.” She put the book to the side and picked up another one.

Suddenly, one of the volumes at the top of their ‘reviewed’ stack began glowing a faint blue.

Both of them paused, staring at it.

“Ehm, are you doing that?” Rosa asked with a puzzled expression.

“I am not,” Scarlett answered.

“Then is it *supposed* to do that? Do books magically signal when they’re overdue here?”

Scarlett frowned. “Not that I am aware of.”

Their attention shifted as footsteps sounded out from nearby. Scarlett was expecting either Allyssa or Shin to return, but instead, an unfamiliar figure rounded the corner of the nearby bookshelf.

It was a woman, perhaps slightly older than Scarlett, dressed in deep emerald robes with golden highlights. Her hair was cut just above the shoulders, and it was a dark purple color that created a striking contrast with the rest of her attire. A pair of round, scholarly glasses framed her eyes, with thin gold chains hanging from the end. Her focus was aimed squarely on her right hand, where a glowing blue arrow floated. In her left, she clasped a hefty stack of scrolls and books tightly against her chest, precariously balancing it as she moved.

Approaching their table, she passed Rosa by and stopped abruptly as the arrow turned towards the glittering book. Her gaze followed suit. “Ah, there we have it.”

She closed her fist, and the arrow disappeared. The woman then leaned forward, dumping her burdensome collection on the table with a slight thud. Scrolls tumbled to the floor, but she didn't seem to mind as she plopped down next to Rosa, reaching out to pick up the now-previously glowing book, examining it intently.

Rosa exchanged a bemused look with Scarlett before greeting the newcomer with a friendly smile. "Hello."

The woman—presumably a wizard—acknowledged Rosa with a quick nod before her attention returned to the book.

"Um, you might have dropped a few things," Rosa said, gesturing towards the scattered scrolls on the floor.

The wizard glanced down. "Oh, those are just props." With a casual gesture, all the items transformed into fading motes of light.

Observing quietly, Scarlett assessed the woman more closely. There was a subtle mole above her right lip, and the gold embroidery on her collar suggested her rank was between that of Principal Wizard Bunce and his two Associate Wizards. Her demeanor lacked most of the formality exhibited by her peers, though.

A few seconds passed, then the woman's attention shifted upwards to land on Scarlett, as though she had only just become aware of her presence. Adjusting her glasses with a deliberate touch, her eyes narrowed slightly as she scrutinized Scarlett, particularly focusing on her clothes. Soon, she gave Rosa a similar appraisal.

"Pardon me if I'm mistaken," she began, "but your attire seems atypical for wizards."

"Oh, these?" Rosa replied, pulling at her clothes with a casual flourish. "These are just props."

"Indeed?" The woman's eyebrows arched, intrigued as she reached out to touch the fabric. "It's quite sophisticated for an illusion. Did you use some umbramancy spell to mimic this texture? I have never seen someone go to such lengths for mere clothing."

Rosa's face broke into a mischievous grin. "Even better. It's the result of the most skilled of craftsmanship — each thread was painstakingly woven from mana by hand, aiming to achieve the utmost of authenticity. I'd say they did a rather exemplary job."

The woman gave a half-smile in return. "Yes, it's almost as though these are real clothes, not magical constructs."

Scarlett found the surprised expression on Rosa's face amusing, but she remained vigilant, watching the wizard as she returned her attention to her book. After a brief pause, Scarlett asked, "May I know your name?"

The woman looked up at her. "I'm Yamina, a Senior Wizard."

"I am Baroness Scarlett Hartford, and this is Miss Rosalina Hale, a retainer of mine."

A slight furrow appeared on Yamina's brow. "Are you by any chance familiar with Grand Wizard Hartford?"

"I am, but there is no familial relation between us." Supposedly. "I am here as an envoy from the empire."

The woman acknowledged Scarlett's introduction with another nod, her voice low. "You must be that noble that's been the subject of recent conversations here on the Isle." Her gaze drifted to the assortment of scrolls, books, and various texts strewn out on the table. "Are you delving into Zuverian studies?"

"...We are, yes," Scarlett answered, trying to gauge the other's thoughts.

Yamina read out some of the titles scattered before them. "*Divinity in Decline — Zuverian Pantheons*", "*Lost Languages and Scripts*", "*Regents of Ruin: Zuverian Leadership and Governance*", "*Harvests of Echoes; Agricultural Practices of the Zuver*". She paused, then asked. "That is a large spread of subjects. Does the collection here meet your needs?"

"The Rising Isle most certainly has an impressive repertoire. We have only scratched the surface of what is available, so it is premature to judge for certain. However, we have yet to find what I am looking for, which has come as somewhat of a disappointment."

The wizard gave her a curious look. "And what are you looking for?"

Scarlett didn't immediately answer.

Seeing her reticence, Yamina spoke with a touch of sincerity. "Ah, you prefer to keep it to yourself. I understand." She cast a look at the surrounding bookshelves. "While the Arcanum Spire boasts a remarkable collection compared to most places, even it can sometimes fall short. Even the more restricted areas can leave one wanting on occasion. Sometimes, for the more elusive information, one must explore the *truly* guarded sections."

Scarlett eyed her thoughtfully. "And which sections would those be?"

The woman pushed on the rim of her glasses, looking back down at her book. "The sections that someone like me unfortunately can't disclose to a mainlander like you."

"I see..."

"Could you tell a mainlander like me, then?" Rosa asked half-jokingly. "I'll pinky swear not to tell a soul."

"Of course," the wizard replied. "Provided you consent to a magical contract involving...toadification."

"Toadification?"

"It transforms you into a toad should you breach the agreement."

Rosa pulled a face. “I think I’ll pass on that, then, thanks.” She shuddered. “Who even thought of inventing a spell that turns people into toads?”

“His name was Eastaughffe,” Yamina said. “He was an arch wizard known for his very peculiar interests.”

“I’d say. Toads are the mucus-mantled squatters of the amphibian aristocracy. Why anyone would prefer them over frogs is a mystery.”

Yamina didn’t seem to disagree with the bard’s assessment as she shifted her gaze to Scarlett, eyeing the stack of unreviewed volumes and scrolls to the side. A slight frown appeared on her face. “Am I interrupting your studies?”

“...Somewhat,” Scarlett admitted.

“That wasn’t my intention.” The wizard shook her head. She collected the book she’d come for—at least it was one Scarlett had already looked through—and stood, preparing to depart. With a wave of her hand, the light around her coalesced into a chaotic collection of scrolls and tomes, awkwardly secured against her robes by her arm. “I’ll take my leave. A pleasure making your acquaintance, Baroness Hartford, Miss Rosalina.”

With a respectful nod, she turned and left in the direction she’d come from, vanishing from their view a few moments later.

“...Do you think it’s something genetic that makes all the strange ones want to become wizards?” Rosa asked after a few seconds.

Scarlett gave her a sideways glance. “If that were true, you would have become a wizard long ago.”

“...Because I have such a big—and shiny—heart, I’m going to chose to take that as a compliment.”

“Very well.”

Scarlett’s gaze remained on the spot where she’d last seen Yamina for a short while before she eventually returned her attention to her current investigation. She didn’t want to jump to any conclusions about the wizard, but Rosa *was* right that this encounter had been somewhat strange. For now, though, there wasn’t much point in belaboring that fact.

As time passed, Scarlett and Rosa both delved back into their studies, with Allyssa and Shin occasionally popping in with new findings. Scarlett wasn’t sure what the time was when Principal Wizard Bunce eventually approached, hands clasped behind his back.

“The hour is growing rather late, Baroness. A meal should be ready for you in your lodgings, so perhaps it’s time to make our retreat for the day,” the man suggested politely. “And please, leave the matter of returning the material you have been studying to the Spire’s archivists. It will be taken care of.”

Scarlett considered him for a moment before deciding to follow his suggestion and standing from her seat. They hadn't found anything of particular relevance, and she didn't think they would even if they kept at it for a few more hours. It would be better to get something to eat and rest their heads.

Gathering the group, with Rosa fetching Fynn, they soon left the third floor of the Arcanum Spire. As they descended to the main atrium's ground floor, now illuminated partly by the night sky through the transparent ceiling, Scarlett turned to Bunce. "I was wondering, are you acquainted with the wizard who conversed with Miss Hale and myself earlier?"

The man gave her a perplexed look. "I'm not certain who you are referring to."

"You did not see her?" Scarlett asked.

He shook his head. "When was this? I must have missed them."

Scarlett eyed him for a moment with a thoughtful frown, then faced away. "Disregard it then. It is hardly important."

She'd leave it for now. She could simply confirm things later.