

238: An Accessible Sanctum

“Be careful with the etheric temporances, and don’t lose focus on your focalizations!” Grand Wizard Hartford’s sharp instructions echoed as a group of Senior Wizards were casting their spells in unison. There were six of them, arrayed before a massive stone door adorned with innumerable runes and sigils, all aglow in a spectrum of colors as the wizards’ spells reacted with them.

Scarlett observed this scene from a short distance away, her arms folded, as she patiently waited for them to finish. Right behind the wizards, Gaspar, stern and focused with staff in hand, closely directed the proceedings with precise commands. One by one, the glowing seals on the door ceased their luminescence as the door grew closer to being unlocked.

The process continued for several minutes until the man finally paused in his supervising to turn around and approach Scarlett, though he didn’t abandon the rigid expression. “It won’t be long now.”

Scarlett studied the great door for a moment, witnessing the wizards dispelling yet another seal with their efforts. “It seems an exhaustive endeavour merely to access a chamber,” she remarked.

“The enchantments guarding the Sanctum are exceedingly intricate, Baroness, and have held since the Zuver originally erected them.” The older man huffed. “These are not defences one can simply bypass without due diligence. Though our Isle has long since deciphered how to bypass them and could dismantle them if necessary, the protective capabilities they offer are irreplaceable. It has always been judged that they are better left as they are.”

“I see. And exactly how much longer until we can proceed, then?”

“Only a few minutes, at most.” Gaspar’s gaze returned to the wizards, clear irritation appearing on his brow. “I said to mind the temporances, you imbeciles! Is this how I taught you?”

Muttering something about mages nowadays, he left Scarlett and returned to overseeing the wizards as they continued working on unlocking the door.

It didn’t seem like he let up even on his own subordinates.

“This place smells a bit like Rosa,” Fynn’s voice sounded out beside Scarlett.

She cast a brief glance to her left, eyeing the white-haired young man. “...Is that so?”

That statement wasn’t particularly shocking to her. It was in the name of this place, after all. The ‘Astral Sanctum’ was bound to have something in common with the Astral Soulstone that had been used to create Rosa’s Heartstone.

Maybe it was a good thing that the bard hadn’t joined them here. There was no telling if the Sanctum might have some unpredictable reactions to the Heartstone, and such things could complicate matters if the wizards learned about it. Scarlett knew from what Dean Goldwin

had told her that the Heartstone's presence was nearly impossible to detect by a mage when it wasn't being used, and she wanted to keep it that way.

Scarlett's attention drifted from Fynn to survey their surroundings — an expansive underground chamber that could accommodate a large assembly of people, carved directly from the bedrock the Rising Isle was built upon. Specifically, it had been carved out right underneath the Chamber of Conjunction, which served as the heart of the Rising Isle in more ways than one.

Earlier that day, the Isle's council had reached a decision to approve Scarlett's petition to enter the Astral Sanctum. She had thought there would have been a bunch of delays associated with that, but to her surprise, Gaspar had swiftly taken charge of the situation, organizing all the necessary arrangements and gathering the wizards for the endeavour.

Currently, Scarlett found herself in the company of almost two dozen Isle Wizards, with only Fynn from her own party as a companion.

Since the Astral Sanctum played such a vital role in the Rising Isle's protections, the council was enforcing stringent security measures around all of this. This apparently included restricting the people Scarlett could bring and deploying a small army of experienced wizards to monitor her every move inside the Sanctum. It felt a bit excessive, in her opinion, to bring all these wizards for measly little her, but she understood the council's concerns.

Her gaze soon settled on one particular wizard stationed near the mouth of the chamber, clad in emerald robes with their face concealed under a wide hood.

Emerald wasn't exactly a unique robe color here on the Isle. Scarlett had seen several wizards wearing it since she arrived. Here, the color of one's robe typically signified one's field of study rather than hierarchical status or school of magic. Emerald was commonly associated with the Mistral Observatory, from the way Scarlett understood it, so this individual could be just about anyone.

That said, they *did* look familiar to her. Like a certain wizard she had encountered just the day before.

Of course, she didn't even have to rely solely on her own judgement for something like this. Fynn had already confirmed that this was the same person she and Rosa had run into at the library.

That in itself didn't have to be strange. Coincidences happened, and this chamber was almost entirely filled with Senior and Principal Wizards. It also wasn't like this was the only wizard who liked going around with their hood up.

But it *was* ever-so-slightly suspicious.

Scarlett returned her focus to the sealed door as the last rune on it dimmed, followed by a resonant that reverberated through the chamber. The wizards standing directly in front of the door stepped back as the heavy barrier began to slowly slide aside.

Gaspar turned to address the room, his voice firm. “We are about to enter the Astral Sanctum. Remember, adhere to protocol at all times. Do not interact with anything without my direct authorization.” His eyes briefly landed on Scarlett, adding, “This especially applies to you, Baroness.”

“Understood,” she responded.

He gave a slight nod in acknowledgment, then led the way through the opening. Scarlett and the others soon followed, entering into the sanctum beyond.

The sight was an impressive one.

The Astral Sanctum was a vast, circular chamber, its walls lined with ornate murals inscribed with ancient Zuverian script that whispered of this place’s history. Overhead, a series of detailed frescoes encircled a domed ceiling, illustrating various landscapes and wonders.

Central to the chamber, a captivating orb of energy hovered, casting a vibrant, fluctuating light throughout the space. Beneath it was a meticulously etched runic circle, and as the orb pulsed, it almost seemed to breathe, shifting the surrounding air. Suspended above, crystals glimmering like starlight floated gracefully, suspended in an invisible ballet as their reflections weaved through the dimmer corners of the room in a tapestry of light and shadow.

Together, the group advanced, stepping into the Sanctum with measured strides and gradually dispersing around it.

Scarlett’s gaze lifted to the frescoes, studying the scenes depicted on them. Some were distinctly familiar.

One showed the Rising Isle, set against the backdrop of a vast ocean, its unique topography of interconnected, terraced islands highlighted by cascading waterfalls and flowing waterways, converging towards a single point at the center.

Another illustrated the imposing form of the Resting Eye, a colossal mass of grey stone rising starkly from the earth, its peak enshrouded in a veil of black smoke as it was surrounded by a large lake.

A third portrayed the grand entrance of the Ever-reaching Grotto, an illuminated cave etched into the face of a tall mountain and seeming to stretch on forever.

There was also one of the Forgotten Tower, a lone, dark spire emerging from a dark oceanic abyss, ensnared by a perpetual tempest of storm clouds that seemed to coil around its crown.

And those weren’t all. Additional images adorned the domed ceiling of the Sanctum, each depicting points of interest that had some form of relevance in the game.

Scarlett noticed Fynn’s gaze fixed on a scene portraying numerous snow-capped peaks. It was the Whitdown Mountains, where his old home was.

The clearing of someone's throat brought Scarlett back to the present, and she turned to face Gaspar, who seemed to be appraising her closely. "What is our next step?" he asked. "Remember, I will handle all the necessary tasks. Simply outline what is required."

Scarlett considered him quietly for a few seconds, then let her eyes wander the chamber. "We have only just arrived, Grand Wizard. I am not all-knowing. If you would allow me a moment to explore the Sanctum, I will provide you with what I can discern from there."

"Hmph. Very well."

She ventured further into the Sanctum, refraining from commenting on how Gaspar immediately moved to follow or the intense scrutiny from several of the other wizards. Meeting the gaze of a few of those wizards, she offered a single, cold smile, noting the flicker of discomfort in their expressions.

She had to admit that, while the excessive caution was stifling, she also found a certain kind of sadistic enjoyment out of it.

She wondered if their wary looks stemmed from Gaspar's influence, her outsider status, or simply the importance of the Sanctum to the Isle.

Maybe it was a mix of those elements.

Approaching the center of the chamber, where the orb hovered by itself, Scarlett paused just outside the ring of runes on the floor, tactfully averting the warning Gaspar had been about to give her.

For a time, she simply inspected the orb, its surface a mesmerising canvas of power that reflected her image amidst shifting lights. She could practically taste the raw energy simmering within, occasionally surfacing in brief luminescent bursts.

There wasn't an item description, which was a shame, but she suspected that this was an Astral Soulstone, akin to the one within Rosa's Heartstone. This one was probably more potent, though, which said a lot.

It would have been nice if she could find something like this for herself, but that was probably asking for too much.

While quiet murmurs and whispers floated among the wizards spread about the chamber, Scarlett moved on to study the crystals orbiting nearby for a bit before heading to the chamber periphery to examine the murals. She could read some of the symbols on them, but far from enough to make any real sense of their contents. There also wasn't much in the way of illustrations here.

Eventually, Gaspar's patience appeared to wane. "Well," he asked. "What findings do you have? Do not tell me you came here without any ideas."

Scarlett met his gaze. She couldn't be sure, but she thought she sensed an undercurrent of expectation in his voice, as though he actually believed she knew something the Rising Isle didn't.

That was curious. She wondered how he had voted on giving her access to this place.

After a moment of contemplation, she simply responded, “The Astral Sanctum is certainly a sight to behold.”

The man’s forehead creased together in a slight scowl. “It is,” he said, waiting for her to continue.

Suppressing a slight smile, Scarlett did so. “In a place rich with conundrums, where would you search for a concealed mechanism or secret passage? The Rising Isle has housed some of the brightest minds for centuries who have had all the opportunity to ponder this question, so surely you have some insight into the topic.”

Gaspar’s scowl deepened. “We are not here for riddles, Baroness.”

“Humour me. There is no rush, is there?”

He stayed silent for a moment, then gestured with his staff towards the orb. “Even after all this time, the Etheric Soulstone continues to be one of our greatest enigmas. Though we have gleaned endless secrets from it, the complexities of its workings remain such that we still ponder the full breadth of knowledge it holds. If there is something we have yet to uncover here, it certainly lies with it. But that was hardly a mystery.”

Scarlett’s gaze shifted to the orb. “A reasonable conclusion, I suppose. It is the wrong one, however.”

Her attention then drifted to a wizard stationed near one of the murals, cloaked in emerald. “And what say you?” she asked.

A tense silence enveloped the room. Even without looking, Scarlett could tell that Gaspar wasn’t pleased by her action. Still, seconds passed without him saying anything.

Eventually, the cloaked figure turned to face Scarlett, removing their hood to unveil a cascade of purple hair and a face framed by a pair of round glasses.

The woman held Scarlett’s gaze, an evaluative pause marking the moment before she adjusted her glasses and redirected her attention to survey the chamber. Her focus eventually settled on the illustrations adorning the ceiling, depicting the Rising Isle and more.

“I always found those representations particularly interesting,” she offered casually.

Scarlett’s lips curled up slightly. “Astute observation.” She then turned back to Gaspar, her expression becoming more serious. “We need to undertake further preparations. I trust that I can count on your full support in these matters, no?”