

## 258: Pit-stops

“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 cast their spells in unison. Six of them stood before a massive stone door adorned with innumerable runes and sigils, all aglow in a spectrum of colors as the wizards’ spells interacted with the engravings.

Scarlett observed this scene from nearby, her arms folded, patiently waiting for them to finish. Behind the wizards, Gaspar, stern and focused with staff in hand, closely directed the proceedings with his commands. One by one, the glowing seals on the door dimmed as the door grew closer to being unlocked.

Several minutes passed before Gaspar finally paused in his supervising to turn and approach Scarlett, though he maintained the stern expression. “It won’t be long now.”

Scarlett studied the great door for a moment, watching the wizards dispelling yet another seal. “It seems an exhaustive task merely to access a chamber,” she remarked.

“The enchantments guarding the Sanctum are exceedingly intricate, Baroness. They 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 their mechanisms 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 turned back to the wizards, annoyance creasing his brow. “I said to mind the temporances, you imbeciles! Is this how I taught you?”

Muttering something about wizards nowadays, he hurriedly left Scarlett to return to overseeing the wizards’ ongoing efforts to unlock the door.

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

“This place smells a bit like Rosa,” Fynn spoke up beside Scarlett.

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

That statement wasn’t particularly surprising 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.

Considering this, it might have been a good thing that the bard hadn’t joined them today. 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 actively used, and she wanted to keep it that way.

Her attention drifted from Fynn to survey their surroundings — an expansive underground chamber that was large enough to host an assembly of people. Carved directly from the bedrock upon which Rising Isle was built, the chamber sat beneath the Chamber of Conjunction, which served as the heart of the Rising Isle in more ways than one.

Earlier this 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, ensuring all the necessary arrangements and gathering the wizards for the endeavour.

Currently, Scarlett found herself among 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. This apparently included limiting the people Scarlett could bring and deploying a small army of seasoned wizards to monitor her every move inside the Sanctum. While it felt somewhat excessive to bring so many wizards just for her, she understood the council's concerns.

Her gaze settled on one particular wizard standing near the entrance 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 any sort of 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. Almost like a certain wizard she had encountered just the day before.

Not that she had to bother relying on her own judgement to be sure. Fynn had already confirmed that this was indeed the same person they had seen in the library.

Of course, this fact by itself didn't have to be significant. 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 redirected her attention back to the sealed door just as the last rune on it faded, followed by a resonance that reverberated through the chamber. The wizards in front of the door stepped back as the heavy barrier began to slowly slide open.

Gaspar turned to address the room, his voice firm and authoritative. "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."

"Very well," she responded.

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

What greeted them was a pretty impressive sight.

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.

At the chamber's center, a captivating orb of energy hovered, casting a vibrant, fluctuating light throughout the space. Below it, a meticulously etched runic circle lay on the floor, pulsing in sync with the orb as if breathing life into the air. Crystals, shimmering like starlight, floated gracefully above, suspended in an invisible ballet as their reflections weaved through the dimmer corners of the room in a tapestry of light and shadow.

With measured strides, most of the wizards began dispersing around the chamber. Scarlett lingered at the entrance for a short while, her gaze resting on the frescoes on the domed ceiling as she studied the scenes depicted in 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 from the earth, its peak shrouded 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 a fresco of the Forgotten Tower — a lone, dark spire emerging from a shadowy ocean abyss, ensnared by a perpetual tempest of storm clouds that seemed to coil around its crown.

And there were more, each of the displays depicting points of interest that had some form of relevance in the game.

Scarlett noticed Fynn's attention staying on a scene portraying numerous snow-capped peaks of 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 in front of her, who seemed to be appraising her closely.

"How do we proceed from here?" he asked. "Remember, I will handle all the necessary procedures or actions. Simply outline what is required."

Scarlett considered him for a moment, then let her gaze 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 share what insights I can gather."

“Hmph. If you say so.”

She moved deeper into the Sanctum, conscious of Gaspar’s following steps and the watchful eyes of the other wizards. Meeting the gaze of a couple of them, she offered a single, wintry smile, noting a 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 in 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 combination of all those factors.

Approaching the center of the chamber where the orb hovered by itself, Scarlett paused just outside the ring of runes on the floor, preempting the warning Gaspar was about to deliver.

For a few seconds, she simply stood there, inspecting the orb. Its surface was 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. Although there wasn’t an item of description, she suspected this was an Astral Soulstone, similar 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 briefly study the crystals orbiting above before walking to the chamber’s edge to examine the murals there. She recognized some of the symbols on them, but far from enough to make any real sense of their contents, and there wasn’t much in the way of illustrations.

She might have spent a bit too much time strolling around the chamber’s periphery, scanning more of those murals, as Gaspar’s patience seemed to eventually thin.

“Well,” he began. “What possible findings do you have? Do not dare tell me you came here with no idea of what you were searching for.”

Scarlett turned to look at him. She couldn’t be sure, but she thought that, despite his sharp words, 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 what his stance had been on granting her access to this place.

After a thoughtful pause, she answered. “The Astral Sanctum certainly is a sight to behold, no?”

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

Suppressing a slight smile, Scarlett did. “In a place rich with conundrums, where would you seek a concealed mechanism or secret passage? For centuries, the Rising Isle has housed

some of the brightest minds who have all had the opportunity to ponder this question, so I am curious what you have to say on the matter.”

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 pointed his staff towards the orb at the center. “Even after all this time, the Etheric Soulstone remains one of our greatest enigmas. Though we have gleaned endless secrets from it, the complexities of its workings remain such that we can only ponder the full breadth of knowledge that went into creating it. If there is something we have yet to uncover here, it certainly lies with it. But that was hardly a mystery.”

Scarlett’s attention shifted to the orb. “A reasonable assumption, I suppose. However, it is the wrong one.”

Her eyes shifted to a figure standing a short distance away from them, draped in emerald robes. “And what say you?” she asked.

A tense silence fell around them. Even without looking, Scarlett could tell that Gaspar wasn’t pleased by her action. Yet he remained silent as the cloaked figure slowly turned to face her, removing their hood to reveal a cascade of purple hair and a face framed by a pair of round glasses.

The woman held Scarlett’s gaze for a few seconds, an evaluative pause marking the moment before she adjusted her glasses and surveyed the chamber. Her focus eventually settled on the ceiling illustrations depicting the Rising Isle and more.

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

Scarlett’s lips curled slightly. “Astute observation.” Turning back to Gaspar, her expression grew more serious. “It appears we need to undertake further preparations. I trust that I can count on your full support in this?”