

## 243: The Veiled Library

Scarlett and her companions found themselves in a dimly lit underground chamber, its age-old stone walls sporadically illuminated by glowing green crystals, painting everything in hues of ghostly jade.

Silence reigned supreme here, punctuated only by the soft echoes announcing their arrival. Statues of ancient Zuver stood guard along the walls, their impassive stone faces eternally watching. At the center of the chamber, their contents obscured by a dark, purplish fog that seemed almost sentient, rows of bookshelves stood, hinting at hidden knowledge.

Considering what this place was, though, it looked smaller than expected. It reminded Scarlett of the simpler Zuverian ruins she had explored in the empire, rather than the more grandiose architecture present here on the Rising Isle.

“Uh, where are we?” Allyssa asked in a low whisper.

“In the Veiled Library,” came Yamina’s response. “It is one of the Rising Isle’s most hidden sanctuaries, home to perhaps the world’s most extensive collection of rare arcane lore and esoteric texts.”

“Oh…” Allyssa’s gaze shifted to Scarlett, a hint of concern in her eyes. “And we’ve just slipped in?”

“It would be best not to dwell on the particulars,” Scarlett said.

She turned her attention to their surroundings, ignoring the girl’s muttered concerns about thinking they were supposed to be here as official dignitaries. It was possible—even likely—that she would have been granted access to this place eventually through official channels, but the opportunity presented by Yamina had been too good to pass up. There was an artifact that she wanted here. Not one that she *needed*, but it would be good to get her hands on it if possible, and she doubted the Isle would willingly part with it if they knew of its existence.

Yamina, though, seemed to be different.

Scarlett’s eyes briefly dropped to the [Orrery of Dissonant Convergence] adorning her wrist, and she glanced up at the wizard. Even with it aimed at Yamina, it didn’t show much more of a reaction than it had before.

Since its presence went unnoticed by most, she had decided to wear it in order to get a better grasp of its exact purpose. Though it did weigh on her wrist, it wasn’t so bad that she couldn’t bear it.

Addressing Yamina, she gestured towards the rows of stone shelves arrayed before them. “I assume that we can explore the collection freely?”

“Feel free,” the woman replied, the sleeves of her robes flowing as she motioned with her hand. “I won’t hinder you.”

Next to Scarlett, Rosa was eyeing the shelves skeptically. “You know, for supposedly being such a trove of knowledge, I can’t help but note that there’s a suspicious lack of books here.”

Yamina offered a slight smile. “Are you sure about that?”

“Well, not when you’re asking me like that.”

“Perhaps you’d like a firsthand look?” The wizard nodded towards the fog-shrouded shelves.

Rosa eyed the shelf with wariness. “What, should I just plunge my hand into mist?”

“That would be a good start.”

Rosa narrowed her eyes, voice laced with mock suspicion. “This won’t result in some finger-eating monster latching onto my hand, will it?”

“It would be a first if it did.”

“That’s not a no.”

Despite her apparent hesitation, Rosa approached the nearest shelf, raising her hand to gingerly cut through the roiling purple fog. The moment of contact seemed to surprise her, and she quickly retracted her hand, now holding an aged, black leather-bound book. She stared at the cover with widened eyes.

Yamina stepped closer to the bard, studying the tome. "*Guardians of the Veil: Warding Against the Blazes.*" She read the title, giving Rosa a meaningful look. “An interesting selection.”

Rosa stayed quiet for a moment, then released a light, dismissive laugh. “I guess I’m just naturally interesting... Not that I made any conscious choice here.”

Yamina laughed softly. “The Veiled Library does not actually let you choose. Instead, it grants the seeker either the tome they want the most, or the one that aligns best with what they’re currently searching for. It appears this book is precisely what you need at this moment.”

Scarlett found the uncomfortable expression on Rosa’s face rather refreshing.

“All we need to do is reach into the shelf, then?” Shin asked as he walked up to the shelf as well, the interest clear on his face.

“That’s correct,” Yamina replied.

With a mix of anticipation and curiosity that one didn’t often see in him, the young man extended his hand through the fog, emerging with a thick volume filled with dense text. “Fascinating”, he mumbled, examining the title.

‘*Regulations of Trade Routes: An Exhaustive Compilation, 8th Century*’, it seemed to say.

“Only you would find excitement in what might be the dullest tome known to man,” she remarked, eyeing the tome. She then reached into the shelf herself, bringing out a book for herself. Her expression immediately froze as she saw what it was.

Shin leaned over, reading the title out for her. “*Elixirs of the Ancients: Secrets of the Alchemical Vanguard.*”

Allyssa’s head spun to look at Yamina, a blend of thrill and disbelief in her voice. “Is this real?”

“Every item within the Veiled Library is,” the wizard replied.

Allyssa’s gaze lingered on the tome, awe evident in her eyes. “This book is *famous*. My old teacher told me it was one of the most sought-after works in alchemy, with only a few copies in the entire empire. I’ve always wanted to read it.” She looked hopefully at Scarlett. “Please tell me we’ll have enough time for me to take some notes before we leave?”

“The Library grants copies of any tome it presents which last for a whole week,” Yamina explained. “You may keep this one.”

Hearing this, Allyssa’s astonishment seemed to shift to unbridled elation, her face lighting up with a radiant smile.

“I think this is what ‘the pot calling the kettle black’ refers to,” Shin remarked next to her.

“Oi, you be quiet. Don’t think being right gives you the right to be smug,” Allyssa retorted with a cautionary glare. Her attention then shifted to Fynn, who had hung back, showing little interest in the shelves. Her smile turned slightly mischievous. “Hey, Fynn, why don’t you give it a go as well? I’m curious what it gives you.”

The young man gave her an indifferent look, then stepped up to the shelf without saying anything and reached through the mist, retrieving a hefty volume that was even thicker than the one Shin had gotten. Its cover seemed to scream practicality from its plainness, a single title stamped on its face. “*Fulton’s Compendium on Human Engagements: Principles of Social Converse.*”

A stifled snort escaped Rosa, drawing a glance from Fynn, who then examined the book with a frown. “Who’s Fulton?”

“Presumably, it’s referring to Fulton the Hermetic Scholar,” Yamina supplied. “He was a famed arch wizard on the Rising Isle a little over a century ago. Apparently, he was most known for his reclusive nature and preference to avoid even other wizards.”

Rosa struggled to contain her laughter, and even Allyssa couldn’t hide a grin. Fynn, however, seemed genuinely puzzled by the book in his hand.

“But I don’t need this,” he said.

Yamina regarded him quietly for a couple of seconds. “Then perhaps the Library might have misjudged your needs.” She then turned her attention to Scarlett. “Now, Baroness, would you like to try it as well?”

Scarlett glanced from the woman to the mist that draped over the shelf like a veil. It looked a lot more uninviting in person than it had through a screen. There was definitely a part of her that blanched at the notion of pushing her hand into that.

Slowly, she reached through the thick mist, feeling as though she was penetrating a cold vacuum. Something seemed to slot itself into her grip, and as she retracted her arm, she found herself holding a leather-bound book.

A slight frown crossed her face as she examined the cover.

It was bare. No title or anything. Flipping it open, she discovered that the pages were empty as well. Turning to Yamina, she found the wizard observing her with a thoughtful gaze.

“What is the meaning of this?” she asked.

Yamina was quiet for a few seconds before responding. “It seems the Library doesn’t possess what you seek.” She too reached into the purple fog, retrieving a similarly blank book. “Something we share in common, apparently.”

A small sense of disappointment washed over Scarlett. She’d hoped to uncover something related to the Anomalous One and its sealing. The Veiled Library was her best shot at that, and it would have made things easier if she could have found it here. She also wouldn’t have minded if it gave her something that could help her in completing Arlene’s quest, but maybe the Rising Isle didn’t keep their historic records in this place.

Following Yamina’s lead, Scarlett returned her book to the shelf, then turned to survey the rest of the Library. The exit, marked by a simple stone staircase, wasn’t too far off, and other than that, there wasn’t much more of note. Outwardly, this place really didn’t look that impressive.

Of course, she doubted Yamina would have brought her here if the woman thought there wasn’t more to this place.

Scarlett’s gaze landed on a Zuver statue standing in the chamber’s corner, a quill in its hand. She turned back to face Yamina. “The Veiled Library provides you with what it believes you need or want, correct? If so, I presume it is possible to refine one’s request to influence the outcome?”

Yamina nodded. “It’s possible, yes, though it demands practice.”

“But you are capable of it?”

The woman adjusted her glasses with a slight push. “Naturally. Are you in search of something particular?”

“A text pertaining to the Zuver and the custodian of this library,” Scarlett said.

Raising both eyebrows, Yamina reached into the shelf, withdrawing a slender, aged book adorned with intricate Zuverian script.

*“The Librarian’s Final Word,”* she translated its title out loud. “Hmm, curious. I wonder if this one is in the records? I was unaware that the Library ever had a librarian.”

“I have found several mentions of them in my own research,” Scarlett shared. “It surprised me that you have not.”

“I am not an expert on the Zuver.” Yamina shrugged, offering the book to Scarlett. “My specialty lies in other fields.”

“So I have heard.” Accepting the tome, Scarlett started moving towards the statue in the corner. “Magister Penney shed some light on your circumstances. It would seem there is far more to you than meets the eye.”

“Maybe so.” Yamina offered a nonchalant smile as she followed closely along with the others. “At the very least, that’s one way of seeing it. I find that, often, complexity is more a matter of perception.”

“That is true, I suppose. I am prone to overthinking myself.” Scarlett stopped in front of the Zuver statue. It was taller than her, with protruding brows and elongated, elf-like ears.

“Many have scoured this library for secrets, to no avail,” Yamina remarked, joining Scarlett in studying the statue. “Myself included.”

Scarlett glanced at her. “Did the same not hold for the Astral Sanctum?”

“It did. I just thought I should inform you about the unlikelihood of discovering anything new here.”

“How thoughtful of you.”

Scarlett brought up the tome in her hands, not bothering to open it, positioning it in front of the statue. At first, nothing happened, but then, a glimmer lit up the statue’s eyes, its hand opening to accept the book, which unfurled on its own. The statue then maneuvered its quill to the open page.

Soon, the chamber rumbled, a segment of the wall becoming transparent to reveal a staircase hidden behind it.

Looking to Yamina, Scarlett found the woman observing the events with an intrigued, but not surprised, expression.

There was a brief period of calm where nobody said anything, shattered by Rosa.

“By the light of Ittar’s shimmering philtrum!” the bard gasped, hands pressed to her face in disbelief. “The wall just vanished! Like magic! I can’t believe what I’m seeing!”

Everybody looked at her.

After a few seconds, she coughed modestly and smiled. “Sorry. The moment felt like it lacked a certain amount of flabbergasted shock, so I thought I’d provide it.”

“...Ever the performer, Miss Hale,” Scarlett said.

“I live to entertain, my Lady.”

Allyssa patted Rosa on the shoulder. “I appreciate your efforts.”

“Thank you.”

The group approached the newly revealed entrance, peering down the staircase before them. It was spacious enough to accommodate them all walking next to each other, embellished with intricate carvings that spiraled down its walls, illuminated by the soft glow of green crystals as it led deep into the bowels of the earth.

An impressed whistle left Rosa. “Looks like we have quite the descent ahead of us.”

“That we do,” Scarlett said. “That is why it is best that we commence without delay if we wish to return before dawn.”

Taking the lead, she started down the stairs, which she suspected went even deeper than those in the Astral Sanctum had. Fynn quickly moved to spearhead their advance, with Shin guarding their rear, and the remainder of their party nestled safely in between.

Casting a sidelong glance at Yamina, Scarlett noted that the woman still looked unruffled by their surroundings. “It almost seems as though you knew what to expect here, Senior Wizard Yamina,” she remarked. “That is curious, considering you suggested the Library held no secrets.”

“Please, just Yamina is fine,” the woman replied. “Or Miss Ward, if you care for the formalities. As for expectations, I had no idea what was here. I simply assumed that you would be able to uncover it.”

“And what makes you so confident about that? Is it the experiences in the Astral Sanctum, or does your confidence stem from insights shared by Dean Godwin?”

Yamina considered the question, her head tilting slightly. “A bit of both, perhaps?”

Scarlett paused for a moment as she eyed her, wondering whether there could be more to it. Then she shifted her focus forward.

“Earlier, the Library presented us both blank volumes,” she began anew. “I believe I grasp the rationale behind mine being empty, but why yours? What question of yours is it that remains unanswered even by the Veiled Library?”

“That’s a rather direct line of inquiry, Baroness. Might I expect you to divulge your secrets as well if I share mine?”

“Not at this moment, no.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Scarlett saw the subtle smile on the wizard's face.

"In that case, I think I'll remain equally reserved."

"So be it."

Scarlett was curious about what Yamina might be looking for. Presumably, it was related to why the woman was willing to covertly bring Scarlett here, despite the council's likely disapproval. Still, she wasn't quite willing to reveal anything about the Anomalous One or the fate of this world to Yamina when they'd only known each other for a few days.

With Godwin, she'd at least had some insights into his character from the game.

The group returned to quiet for a while as they made their way down the passage until Allyssa eventually spoke up.

"So, what should we expect from here?" the girl asked. "This place seems a bit different from the other Zuverian ruins we've visited, but should we still expect a fight?"

The question was clearly aimed at Scarlett, with everyone's eyes—including Yamina—turning to her.

"...It would not surprise me if we did indeed face some resistance," Scarlett said. "If so, try to avoid damaging the surroundings if you can." She directed her gaze to Yamina. "Will you be able to identify and detect any threats with your spells?"

The woman waved her hand through the air, leaving a trail of blue light, her brows furrowing slightly for a moment. "Divination spells are obstructed here, and I don't think I will be able to deconstruct the wards responsible for this. I will have to wait until we get further in to see what I can do."

"Very well."

Since Scarlett didn't know how capable Yamina was in combat, it was best to assume that their party would be doing most of the work.

As they descended further, Rosa sidled up to Scarlett after a while, leaning close to her in a whisper. "Hey, just checking. In case we do encounter any trouble, should I hold back on using my *special* charms or are we pretending those don't exist at the moment?"

She subtly nodded her head in Yamina's direction, who was currently examining some of the wall inscriptions.

Scarlett considered the wizard for a few seconds.

She had a suspicion that it wouldn't be a problem if Yamina found out about Rosa's particular constitution, but it was probably best to play it safe.

"For the time being, keep to your normal charms," she told Rosa.

“Understood, boss lady,” the bard replied, then moved away again.

Later, as they finally started to see signs of what might have been the bottom of the passage, Yamina was the one to break the silence.

“I’m curious,” the woman said, looking at Scarlett. “How many locations like this one are you aware of on the Isle?”

Scarlett regarded her evenly. “...It is difficult to say. There are some I have encountered only in passing references, so I cannot even be certain they exist. There are also those that might have already been uncovered by the wizards here.”

Yamina seemed to mull this over for a moment. “Along with the Veiled Library and the Astral Sanctum, I believe you also referenced the Hall of Echoes during your initial discussions with Grand Wizard Hartford. The council is working under the assumption that you hold the secrets to all three. Is that correct?”

It seemed like the woman really was privy to the things the Isle’s council debated.

“Possibly,” Scarlett replied.

“Even just the possibility is an intriguing one,” Yamina said. “The Hall of Echoes has always been a particular fascination of mine, despite its irrelevance to my expertise.”

“Then should luck be on our side, we might explore whatever it may hide in the future.”

Scarlett was planning on visiting the Hall of Echoes eventually, considering its significance in the game. That would probably have to wait a bit longer, though.

“For now, I suggest that we maintain our focus on what is before us. We will soon see what the Veiled Library has to show us.”