

244: Cranky librarians

When Scarlett and the others reached the bottom of the stairs, the sight that awaited them was enough to make them halt for a brief moment. It was a room vastly bigger than the chamber above, adorned with countless rows of stone shelves laden with books and other texts.

Spectral entities, clad in thick, grey robes, glided between the aisles with a strange elegance, pausing now and then to peruse or touch the spines of the books.

"...Alright, now *this* looks more like a library," Rosa remarked with a hint of amusement.

"I suspect this is the true Veiled Library," Yamina said, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose with a look of fascination. "The initial chamber was likely created to serve as a physical dialogue with this place. The books had to be kept somewhere, after all. Considering the vastness before us, the Zuver likely employed spatial magic to accommodate the collection, but even so, its size surpasses my expectations."

"How extensive is the Veiled Library's collection supposed to be?" Shin asked.

"No one knows for certain. Since the founding of the Rising Isle, we've catalogued over one hundred thousand unique volumes and contributed nearly as many ourselves. Among these are numerous rare and unique texts, though many are also mundane or in such a state of disrepair that they're mostly unreadable. Judging from what we see here, I would say that the Isle has probably only uncovered half of the Library's full scope."

Scarlett considered the woman for a few seconds, then turned her gaze to the endless arrays of literature filling this place. She hadn't really considered that aspect in the game, but unearthing this place might actually be considered more significant to the Rising Isle than the Astral Sanctum or Hall of Echoes. Although she supposed that depended on the value of whatever unread works were kept here.

Given that the chamber above seemed designed to provide what you sought or needed, it felt like the Isle should already have found most of the important works.

Her eyes fell on one of the spectral figures meandering through the aisles, seemingly ignoring the group's presence.

"Are those supposed to be the librarians?" Allyssa asked, pointing towards one that drifted by before disappearing down another aisle. Their faces were obscured by a grey, semi-transparent hood that emanated a dissonant aura.

"They likely serve a similar purpose," Yamina replied. "They're the caretakers of the library, in all probability."

Fynn stepped forward. "Are they dangerous?"

"It would surprise me if they weren't. Whether they are inherently hostile is another matter."

“Observing their actions, that does not appear to be the case,” Scarlett said. “Assuming their role is to protect this repository, they will likely only retaliate if we harm the books or do something to anger them.”

Allyssa, with crossbow in one hand and the other on a vial in her bandolier, glanced at Scarlett. “So it should be safe for us to continue?”

“There is only one way to know for certain. Fynn, lead the way.”

Following Scarlett’s command, Fynn ventured further into the vast space. He paused briefly in front of the entrance to one of the aisles, allowing a librarian to pass by near him. The figure stopped at a shelf, extending an arm that briefly illuminated as it touched the spine of a tome, then it continued on its path, disregarding Fynn entirely.

“They don’t seem to mind,” Rosa said. “How novel. I don’t think we’ve ever run into anything on one of these adventures of ours that *hasn’t* threatened us in some way.”

“We will have to see whether that will remain true or not.” Scarlett moved to follow Fynn. The others soon trailed behind her, and they all stopped in front of the young man, who was surveying the surroundings with a slightly furrowed brow.

“Is there something wrong?” Scarlett asked.

He turned to her, then shook his head. “No. But these things are weird. They don’t feel dead or alive. I don’t know what they are.”

“They remind me of those Aurenthial thingies that we ran into before,” Allyssa said. “Or is that just me?”

Yamina regarded the girl with interest. “You’ve come across Aurenthials?”

“Yeah, when we were in this old Followers shrine.”

“It’s quite uncommon for those outside the Followers to even be aware of their existence, let alone encounter them.”

“These feel different,” Fynn said, looking thoughtful. “I don’t think they’re Aurenthials.”

“The underlying principle is likely similar, but the process would differ significantly,” Yamina mused, watching another librarian glide past. The lenses on her glasses took on a slight glow as her gaze sharpened. “Unlike Aurenthials, these beings are not animated by divine power or mana. In fact, I cannot detect anything whatsoever from them. It is as if they are only acting as conduits.”

“Conduits for what?” Shin asked.

“That is the crux of the matter. Typically, the Zuver employ constructs as vessels for their animancy spells. Those are powered internally, and I can usually detect the presence of such spells.” Yamina paused, appearing thoughtful. “These, however... I’m not sure there is anything beneath those robes.”

“That doesn’t sound foreboding at all,” Rosa remarked.

A hint of a smile played on Yamina’s lips. “On the contrary, I think it sounds rather intriguing. It begs the question of why the Zuver would employ such a technique here when there are no records of it anywhere else, however.”

“I am sure that the Rising Isle will have ample time to investigate the matter further later. For now, our priority remains to move forward,” Scarlett said.

“Where are we going?” Allyssa asked. “Does this place even have anything other than books?”

It was true that, at first glance, this place seemed to house nothing but endless shelves of texts.

Scarlett surveyed their surroundings for a moment before pointing down one of the aisles. There, a good distance away, at the far end of the chamber, was a single passage. “I believe that will be a good place to start.”

They began making their way in that direction, passing through the labyrinth of shelves filled with volumes amassed over the ages. Eventually, they reached the end, stopping in front of the passage which was hewn from the bedrock itself, its entrance marked with Zuverian symbols.

Yamina appeared to study those symbols closely. “Only those authorized are allowed to continue past here.”

“I’m gonna go out on a limb and say that it’s a bit late to apply for that authorization,” Rosa remarked.

“Probably, yes.” Yamina’s hands moved through the air as she seemed to cast a spell of some kind, though it didn’t seem to have any immediate effect. “The wards against divination remain active, so I cannot tell what lies ahead. One possibility seems likely, however.”

“And what’s that?” Allyssa looked at the wizard.

Yamina’s eyes shifted towards Scarlett. “Perhaps you have a theory, Baroness?”

Scarlett matched her gaze for a brief moment, then looked forward. “It is obvious, is it not? This is a library. What is a library without a forbidden section?”

Rosa chuckled. “Dull, I’d say.”

“While I wouldn’t go so far as to call it dull, I do agree with the general assessment,” Yamina said. “Despite its extensive collection, the Veiled Library is conspicuously lacking in resources related to certain fields of study. I have always found that peculiar.”

Scarlett nodded. “Should there be a forbidden area, I anticipate the Zuver to have put safeguards in place to deter intruders. Remain vigilant from this point on.”

Everybody steeled themselves as they began descending the passage, with Fynn leading. Illuminated by more of the green crystals, the passage extended a good distance before taking a turn. After

about five minutes, they arrived at a chamber that looked strikingly similar to the chamber they'd just left. In fact...

"Did we just circle back to where we started?" Allyssa echoed some of the group's confusion, her gaze lingering on a librarian crossing in front of them.

"What a seamless spatial translocation," Yamina murmured to herself.

Rosa turned to Scarlett. "I'm guessing endlessly wandering around the same place all night isn't part of our plan. Any bright-eyed insights on what to do from here?"

Scarlett examined the Zuverian symbols on the wall behind them, then eyed their surroundings for a moment. She had been wondering whether they would run into a problem like this one down here.

If she recalled correctly, there were multiple passages like this one spread throughout the chamber, some looping back, others leading to combat encounters. There wasn't really any particular trick to it other than exploring them all, as far as she was aware.

"We will simply have to be thorough and patient in our search," she said, preparing to go find the next passage.

"Wait a moment, if you will," Yamina interjected.

Scarlett looked at the woman as Yamina scrutinized the passage behind them, her fingers thoughtfully adjusting her glasses.

"Not sure engaging it in a staring contest will do much," Rosa joked, arms folded. "Then again, given the stubbornness of certain people in our group.."

"I don't think you should be the one saying that, Rosa," Allyssa pointed out.

The bard grinned. "Never claimed I was exempt."

Yamina retrieved a leather-bound emerald tome from inside her robes, its cover embellished with silver and gold accents. It opened by itself, revealing a page filled with intricate crests.

"While I don't dare compare myself to the great Zuverian arch mages of the past and their formidable accomplishments, I do have *some* pride. Unraveling the type of spells used here is supposed to be my expertise. It wouldn't do for me to be outwitted this easily."

The air around them came alive with runes, flickering in an assortment of hues.

Scarlett eyed the wizard. "Do you think you can bypass whatever conjuration is at work in this passage?"

"Possibly. I would first have to determine its nature before I can say for certain."

"...Very well. I see no harm in at least allowing you the opportunity to try."

If it could save them time, she didn't mind.

Fynn led the way as they re-entered the passage. They proceeded down it in the same manner as before, albeit slower this time. Yamina remained focused as they moved, repeatedly casting new spells as she examined their surroundings. After a few minutes, however, they found themselves back in the main chamber.

Yamina paused, analyzing the runes hovering before her, then turned around. "Hmm. There is something I need to examine more closely," she said, heading back into the passage.

Scarlett blinked, seeing that. The woman was more stubborn than she'd expected.

Without further ado, Scarlett and the group followed, and after yet another few minutes of walking, they were back in the main chamber.

Yamina wore a serious expression as she seemed to ponder something. "I see. I believe I understand the mechanism at play here."

Wordlessly, she once again ventured down the passage.

The group exchanged uncertain glances with each other, looking towards Scarlett as if asking whether to follow. After considering it for a moment, she nodded, and all of them reentered the passage.

This time, Yamina halted midway through the passage, her attention fixed on a certain section of the wall. To Scarlett, it didn't look like anything more than carved stone, but the woman appeared deep in focus.

Soon, Yamina turned another page in her spellbook, causing the runes around her to vanish abruptly. "Fascinating. Fascinating and clever. I wish I could have met the mind behind this enchantment. It is beyond any contemporary barrier I've faced. Ingenious, in a way."

"Is that good or bad?" Allyssa asked.

"From a scholarly standpoint, it's the former. However, for our immediate needs, it presents somewhat of an obstacle," Yamina explained. "Dissecting this enchantment in order to deactivate it could take months."

"Then we will have to find an alternate route," Scarlett said.

"Not necessarily," Yamina replied. "This enchantment integrates multiple magical disciplines in its spellcraft, primarily employing a complex application of arcane geometry to create a looped spatial configuration. Given its intricacy, it likely involves a series of localized reality warps, anchored to several ley-line intersections in the walls, though I have yet to confirm this. The most intriguing aspect, however, is that it appears to have mixed in an umbramancy ward to subtly shift the perceptions of those inside, concealing the phenomenon from those who would otherwise detect it."

Rosa gave the woman a blank look. "...I did not understand a single word of what you just said."

"I understood some of it," Fynn said.

“Good on you. Please teach me later.”

He nodded earnestly. “Alright.”

Yamina placed her spellbook down on the ground as she began casting a new series of spells. “Though I think you may be inflating its complexity, I can give you a lesson once we are finished here.”

As she worked, more runes materialized in front of her, converging on the wall section she’d been looking at. Her spellbook lit up on the stone, with the runes in the air pulsing erratically before finding a steady pattern. Then, with a deliberate motion, Yasmina clasped her hands together.

Scarlett didn’t know what, but she felt *something* shift in their environment, as if a mismatched piece had been corrected.

“...Did that do something?” Allyssa asked after a few seconds.

“It did,” Yasmina confirmed, picking up her spellbook and returning it inside her robes. “The ward will not consider us targets for now, but we must hurry. Our window of opportunity is brief.”

Exchanging quick glances, the group hastened to follow the wizard as they proceeded down the passage.

“So, what exactly did you end up doing?” Rosa asked as she caught up with Yasmina at a somewhat steady pace.

“I simply adjusted the enchantment’s detection mechanism. While the underlying ward was ingenious, it relied on what is called ‘Essence Resonance Detection’ to determine our presence. Essentially, it tunes into the unique magical signature that every being carries, much like an arcane signature, and aligns its matrix with the intruder’s essence to create a disturbance in the ambient magical field. This triggers an alert, but that alert can be intercepted by creating an opposite disturbance in the environment.”

“Okay, I’m not gonna pretend to make much sense of that, but it does sound nifty. Still, I thought you said it would take months to figure that one out.”

“It would undoubtedly have taken months to completely unravel the enchantment itself, yes, but interfering with its detection is far less complex,” Yamina said.

“Seems kinda counterintuitive to set up such a spell if it’s that simple to bypass,” Rosa replied. “Maybe the Zuver weren’t quite as adept at the ol’ magic as they say.”

Yamina tilted her head thoughtfully. “It is true that this is a weakness that compromises the integrity of the spell, but perhaps I am slightly understating the difficulty in what I just did. I don’t know any others who could reproduce what I just did without significant preparation.”

“Oh.” Rosa glanced over at Scarlett, then back at the wizard. “That’s one way of acknowledging your skill, I guess.”

As they progressed through the passage, they eventually arrived not at the familiar chamber from before, but rather in another space, this one smaller. It mostly consisted of barren stone, except for rows of unmoving forms draped along the room's perimeter. Those forms looked similar to the robes of those librarians they'd seen previously, but hanging limply in the air.

The second one of them stepped into the room, though, the robes stirred, taking on more human shapes as they faced the intruders.

Rosa grimaced. "Sometimes I hate when you're right, Scarlett."

"I do share that sentiment on occasion," Scarlett replied as she prepared all of her gear. "Miss Ward, would you be capable of neutralizing these things?"

Yamina's hands glowed for a moment as she cast some spell, then gave a shake of her head. "No."

"Then we will have to engage them directly," Scarlett declared. "Ready yourselves."

As one, the librarians were all enveloped in a grey aura and surged forward.

Fynn and Shin stepped forward, forming a defensive frontline. Rosa played her kleret, weaving her music throughout the area to buff the rest of them with her charms, while Allyssa pulled out two vials from her bandolier. Scarlett used the [Foxfire Charm] given to her by Arlene to summon the fox Emberling and conjured forth several pyrokinesis attacks to manage the threat.

She was somewhat surprised to see that the grey area surrounding the librarians moved to douse part of her flames, giving them at least part resistance. Not wanting to waste too much of her mana, she decided to focus her flames on herding them towards Shin and Fynn rather than offense.

Shin, fortified by Rosa's charms, relied on his armor and shield to stand his ground as the first librarians approached him, their auras coalescing to form thin spears that shot out at him. Fynn, meanwhile, leveraged his supernatural agility and fortitude to simply tear into the attackers, his wind magic causing several of them to be flung back across the room.

As for Allyssa, she had already tossed her two vials to both sides, which spilled a flammable liquid over a large area that Scarlett had ignited to form barriers of flame on their flanks. The Emberling stood in front of one of these barriers, amplifying the fire's ferocity even further.

While Scarlett started preparing to use her hydrokinesis to strike at the librarians' weak points—she was hoping water would work better than fire—she was surprised when Yamina suddenly started casting a spell beside her.

Soon, all of the vulnerabilities highlighted by Scarlett's [Charms of Apperception] became even clearer, and her party all seemed to pause for a moment.

Had the woman just provided the same effect for all of them?

Fynn was the first to take advantage of this, and his attacks immediately grew markedly more effective, his conjured claws slicing through the librarians' defenses with much more ease.

Scarlett cast a glance in Yamina's direction, who responded with a quizzical look. "Did you perhaps not expect me to help while I was here?"

"...I was uncertain what to expect in combat, truthfully."

"Well, consider this my contribution," the woman said, indicating the combat unfolding before them.

Scarlett gave her an appreciative nod, then refocused all of her attention on the battle. Yamina's spell wasn't quite as useful to her, given her artifact, but it proved incredibly effective for her companions as the librarians began to fall in quick succession. Fortunately, Scarlett also found that her hydrokinesis attacks—sharpened into fine blades and spears of water—worked better than her pyrokinesis here, piercing through their foes' weakened defences.

It took them roughly five minutes to bring the fighting to an end. At that point, both Shin and Fynn had suffered numerous injuries on the frontline, but nothing that Rosa couldn't patch up with her charms. As the final librarian collapsed, its robes shredded into pieces, Scarlett turned to Yamina.

"Your assistance was invaluable."

"I'm confident you would have managed without me, but I'm glad I could be of assistance," the woman said while observing Rosa healing the last of Shin's injuries for a bit. She then eventually turned her analytical gaze to Scarlett. "I had heard from Warley that you were likely more capable than appearances would have one believe, but I think he might still have underestimated you somewhat, Baroness."

"Is that so?"

Scarlett didn't really know what Godwin thought of her combat ability. As far as she knew, he'd never actually seen her fight, and whatever evaluation he might have of her was likely outdated by this point.

"Your magic is also quite unique," Yamina said. "A curious blend of magic. Although I'm sure you have been told that before."

"Yes, more than once."

The woman regarded her thoughtfully for a few seconds. "If I may ask, how did you come to master both true hydrokinesis *and* pyrokinesis? Who taught you?"

"Perhaps it should not surprise me that you could discern what I was using so easily." Scarlett shook her head. "As for who taught me, much of my learning was self-directed. I have received some guidance from an acquaintance of mine, but their identity is one that I must keep confidential, unfortunately."

Yamina raised her eyebrows. "I understand. Nonetheless, your prowess is remarkable. The mastery you exhibit for *both* hydrokinesis and pyrokinesis is something I've never encountered before from any single mage. Your command of pyrokinesis alone may well exceed that of Grand Wizard Hartford."

“Truly?”

While Scarlett didn't think it was *that* impressive, given her reliance on the system, she couldn't help but feel slightly pleased by the acknowledgment.

“We try not to inflate the boss lady's ego too much,” Rosa cut in, having finished attending to the others' wounds. “She's got enough things that she can lord over the rest of us as it is.”

Scarlett offered a light frown in response.

The bard shrugged. “I'm not saying you haven't earned the right to lord things over us.”

“...Let us move on,” Scarlett said, preferring to leave her thoughts unspoken.

It *was* true that she often lorded around her power and knowledge. There wasn't much she could do about it when it was essentially hard-coded into her personality. Still, it was a tad embarrassing to have it pointed out so directly.

Before they could advance past their current chamber—using another passage on the other end—Yamina took some time to investigate the defeated librarians with her magic. Unfortunately, she didn't seem to find anything of note that shed light on their nature or how they worked, which seemed to disappoint her.

Still, with that out of the way, they continued on. Unlike the first passage they tried, the next one didn't try any fancy tricks that had them moving in circles, instead leading them immediately to another room filled with more of those hostile librarians. Defeating those wasn't much harder than the first encounter, and after several more repetitions of this pattern, they arrived at what seemed to be the final chamber.