

282: Tropical Isle returns

Scarlett and her companions materialised in a spherical chamber inside the Chamber of Conjunction on the Rising Isle, its polished stone floor intricately carved with arcane symbols and pulsing veins of magical energy. A Kilnstone hovered in the air nearby, its grey surface shimmering faintly. In the corners of the room, a handful of wizards stood silently, observing their arrival.

Three familiar figures approached, their grey robes adorned with varying numbers of ornate gold lines at the collar. Principal Wizard Bunce led the group, flanked by his two Associate Wizards.

“Baroness Hartford,” Bunce greeted with a somewhat formal nod, “welcome back to the Rising Isle.”

Scarlett inclined her head in response. “Thank you, Principal Wizard.”

“If you would follow me,” the man said, gesturing towards the exit. As they left the chamber, they entered a long, vaulted hallway that eventually opened into a vast vestibule teeming with wizards hurrying about their business.

As they navigated through the crowd, Bunce spoke over his shoulder. “I understand you’ve made significant adjustments to your schedule to join us today, Baroness. I apologise that our welcome isn’t quite as elaborate as your last visit.”

Their progress halted momentarily as a group of white-robed wizards rushed past, arms laden with thick tomes and long staffs.

“That is quite alright,” Scarlett replied, her eyes scanning their surroundings. She’d been wondering how they’d be received this time, but she preferred it this way. It meant less time wasted on formalities.

She turned her attention back to Bunce, eventually. “I remain curious, however, about the sudden urgency of my summons. Do you know the reason behind it?”

The wizard shook his head. “I’m afraid not. Even if I did, I would not be at liberty to say.”

“Who would, then?”

“Grand Wizard Hartford will be receiving you shortly. I’m sure he can address any questions you might have on the matter.”

Oh? So Gaspar *would* be her liaison again, after all. Scarlett had been pondering that as well. Their personalities didn't exactly mesh, but she had to admit he usually managed to maintain an overall professional demeanour when it mattered. Plus, she had some business to discuss with him.

As they exited the vestibule and ascended a spiraling staircase, Allyssa spoke up. "Is there a reason everyone seems so frantic back there?"

"The Rising Isle maintains active Kilnstone across the continent and beyond," Scarlett answered as her gaze moved over some ancient Zuverian inscriptions etched into murals on the wall. "With recent events, the empire and its citizens are not the only ones affected. With the Isle's few numbers, I imagine most of its wizards have been working tirelessly these past few weeks."

Bunce nodded in agreement. "Indeed. Tensions have risen in many nations, and while the monster incursions from reports are primarily concentrated in the empire, they're not entirely limited to that region. Our collaborations across the continent have us sending many mages to inspect and coordinate efforts. In addition, we're also investigating the mysterious event that caused the entire Kilnstone network to cease functioning in order to ensure it does not happen again. It's consuming much of our resources."

Soon, they arrived in a meeting room. A broad window at the far end offered a view of one of the Rising Isle's many waterways, with elegant buildings lining the canal-side. The central arrangement of chairs and couches with a table in the middle sat atop a transparent floor, beneath which dazzling patterns of magical lights flowed. Emerald crystals suspended from the walls bathed the room in a soft, green glow as the natural light outside had mostly faded.

Noticing that the chamber was currently empty, Scarlett turned to their guide. "Where is Grand Wizard Hartford?"

"He will arrive shortly, Baroness," Bunce replied, gesturing towards the furniture. "If you would be so kind as to wait here, I would be most thankful."

Scarlett regarded him for a moment before striding towards the seating area. "Very well," she said.

She hoped she wouldn't be kept waiting for as long as last time.

As Bunce and his associates took their leave, Scarlett and her group settled into the comfortable seats. To her relief, they *didn't* have to wait long. Within minutes, footsteps sounded out from the entrance, revealing Grand Wizard Hartford in his distinguished black robes, an ornate ebony staff in hand.

“Good. You’re here already,” Gaspar said as he entered, his staff tapping against the stone floor with every step. He paused briefly as he passed Fynn, peering down at the youth who was settled in on a couch next to Shin. “Hmph. It seems you bothered to find a seat this time, at least,” he remarked before continuing to an armchair opposite Scarlett.

Allyssa glanced at Fynn, her head tilted in curiosity. “What did you do last time?”

A confused frown creased Fynn’s brow. “I don’t know.”

“He sat on the floor,” Gaspar answered gruffly. “As if the Rising Isle does not have plenty of proper seating available for its guests.” His gaze shifted to Scarlett. “Your companions are as audacious as you, Baroness. Do you specifically seek out individuals based on their peculiarity?”

“I employ them based on their capabilities,” Scarlett replied casually. “Their unique personalities are secondary to their actions and skills.”

Gaspar grunted. “I suppose you have a point there, at least,” he conceded with some reluctance. “Regardless, welcome back to the Rising Isle. Both I and the Council appreciate you making time to come here despite the current situation in the empire.”

Scarlett’s eyebrows lifted slightly as she considered him. “I have my own reasons for returning as well,” she said after a moment.

“That’s good, then.” The man nodded.

“I will admit,” Scarlett continued, “I am somewhat surprised you are the one greeting me this time. Given your previous reluctance to assume the role, I would have thought you would delegate the responsibility to another wizard. Magister Penney, for example. I imagine he would not have minded the assignment.”

If it had been ‘Hugbert’ meeting her here, she might have been able to inquire with him about Yamina. Scarlett was curious about what the woman was up to.

“I don’t shirk my responsibilities so lightly, Baroness,” Gaspar replied, a hint of annoyance in his voice. “Not even when they prove...somewhat vexing.”

“Is that so?” Scarlett studied him for a few seconds longer before reclining in her seat.

“That is just as well, I suppose. There are matters I wished to discuss with you specifically. If you recall, you were tasked with investigating the history of an imperial wizard who once called this isle home — a man named Delmont. I would like to know how that matter has progressed.” Her eyes narrowed slightly. “I presume that, since you were instrumental in preventing my personal investigation, you have not neglected this responsibility during my absence from the Isle?”

Her objective this time was to find out what happened to Arlene so that she could find the heirloom the man had supposedly been given by the woman. That meant her priority was ensuring the Council actually held their end of the bargain.

A scowl formed on Gaspar’s forehead at her implication. “Of course I haven’t,” he answered with a huff. When it looked like he was about to continue, though, he instead fell silent briefly, steepling his fingers while studying Scarlett. “...However, I would like to know if you yourself have uncovered any new information about this man since you asked us to look into him?”

“No,” Scarlett replied. “Nothing beyond his name and the fact that he left the empire to join the Rising Isle. That is why I am here, after all. Your job is not to question my knowledge on the subject, but to help me learn more. I presume you have at least identified the individual I am referring to.”

“Who said I was questioning you?” The man shook his head while grumbling, but nonetheless, straightened in his seat. “And yes, I have identified him. It was not much of a challenge, to be frank. The man you’re inquiring about was an arch wizard.”

Scarlett’s eyes widened slightly. “He was?”

She paused. That revelation, while somewhat unexpected, made a certain amount of sense. Considering Delmont was Arlene’s brother, a disciple of one of the first deacons, and apparently directly familiar with Ustrum—one of the empire’s most renowned wizards—it was logical that he would be a powerful mage in his own right. She could only imagine the empire’s reaction to one of its arch wizards defecting to the Rising Isle, though. Especially at that point in time.

No wonder they had tried to erase as many traces of Delmont as possible.

“The challenging part,” Gaspar continued, “has been identifying and locating this supposed necklace heirloom you’re searching for. If it’s true, as you claim, that it’s neither

an artifact nor enchanted in any way, there would be little reason for it to be mentioned in our records. My results so far seem to confirm this.”

“What of his descendants?” Scarlett asked. “Did he have any? If so, it is possible the necklace might have been passed down to them.”

Gaspar’s frown deepened as he folded his arms, meeting her gaze. “...I’m currently looking into that possibility, seeing if they might have anything that fits the description you provided.”

“Then they remain on the Isle? Who are they?”

“None of your concern, Baroness,” the man said. “I will handle contacting them to inquire about the matter. I am doubtful it will lead anywhere, however, given he lived several generations ago.”

Scarlett mirrored his frown. “Then do you believe that you will be unable to complete this task?”

He shook his head. “That’s not what I said. Simply that it will likely prove far more challenging than you might think. Naturally, I’ll continue investigating whenever I have the time, even if I personally don’t see much value in this pursuit. As agreed between the Council and you, I’ll do whatever is within my power to ensure the matter is concluded before you leave again. I happen to be a man of my word.”

“...Very well,” Scarlett said, keeping her voice measured. “It would be unfortunate if the Rising Isle’s council could not deliver on its promises after already receiving their end of the bargain, but I will continue to have faith in your abilities.”

She truly hoped he was right, or she’d have to find some other way of completing Arlene’s quest. That would probably piss both him *and* the Council off.

“On the subject of bargains,” she continued, eyeing Gaspar thoughtfully. “Perhaps you recall that I delivered a list of items and materials to the Council during my last visit, in exchange for what I had provided with my information. Due to my trust in the Council’s integrity, I did not mind affording you time to properly prepare my compensation, but I am curious how matters are proceeding on that front.”

Gaspar’s eye twitched slightly, his expression souring. He remained silent for a few seconds before answering. “That’s not my area of responsibility, and in my opinion, the Council was far too lenient in agreeing to your demands. However, to my knowledge, at

least half of the listed items have been procured. The remainder consists of materials that will take longer to acquire, or that we simply don't have the ability to provide at the current time. I suspect you'll be asked to reconsider those."

"Reconsider how?" Scarlett asked.

"...You'll likely be provided a list of *other* priceless artifacts and materials we can offer instead," he answered grudgingly.

"I see. Then I will eagerly await that list."

Neither Scarlett nor the Council could likely put a strict value on the debt they owed her simply for revealing the Astral Sanctum's hidden sanctuary, but judging from some conversations she'd had with Magister Penney during her last visit, it was probably even higher than she'd initially expected. The fact that *most* of the Council—which she'd been informed was very divided on most topics related to an outsider like her—had agreed to her requests seemed to confirm that.

Still, she hadn't actually expected them to gather so much of it this quickly. Much of what she'd asked for consisted of rare materials and reagents she was familiar with from the game or from her research in this world, items that even the Rising Isle wouldn't have easy access to. She planned to use them for both upgrading the Loci in the future and for having artisans craft more gear for her party.

"Are those the only separate matters you wanted to discuss?" Gaspar asked, his tone betraying a trace of impatience.

Scarlett returned her full attention to the man. "I believe it is, yes."

"Good. Then let's not waste any more time and get to the matter at hand," he said.

Scarlett watched him quietly, then nodded. "Very well. I am curious about that as well. Tell me, what brought the Council to suddenly request my presence here on the Rising Isle with such urgency?"

"Before I tell you that, Baroness, there's something I want to ask you." Gaspar's expression grew grave, his voice lowering. "What do you know about the Hall of Echoes?"