

226: Outposts

Scarlett and Dean Godwin strolled back from the hedge garden to the mansion, making their way to the front courtyard, which was still under renovation. Scarlett could tell from the Loci's senses that this was where Rosa was.

Upon arriving at the courtyard, they spotted the bard perched on a simple stone bench, clad in a cozy fur coat. Klert in hand, the bard was performing an upbeat tune as a fiery fox moved in front of her. Around her, several unlit outdoor candles were arrayed in a wide circle, the snow partially melted around their metal holders.

Rosa chuckled heartily as she played away on her instrument, causing one of the candles to ignite with a dark red flame. The fox at the center of the candles immediately spun and leaped towards the flickering light, which extinguished itself promptly, only for another candle to flare up in a teasing dance that attracted the fox's attention in this new direction.

"Just you wait, my fiery little friend. In time, we'll be an unstoppable duo that crowds all across the empire will have to fear!" the bard declared, her tone playfully sinister.

Scarlett suppressed a sigh, pausing at the courtyard's edge along with Godwin. Lending Rosa the [Foxfire Charm] might have been a mistake.

"That's an intriguing creature," Godwin remarked, observing the fox as it pursued the elusive candlelights but never seemed to catch its prey. The creature was made of living flames and moved with an almost ethereal grace, but curiously, its body didn't seem to affect the snow beneath its paws.

Soon, Rosa noticed their arrival and paused in her music, turning to face them. The brown-haired woman's face lit up with a smile. "Oh? If it isn't the classy old magic man. It's been a while."

A soft laugh left the wizened wizard as they neared Rosa. To keep warm without additional clothing, Scarlett used her pyrokinesis to maintain a comfortable temperature in the air around them, which seemed to impress Godwin.

"So, what brings you both to watch my humble performance?" Rosa asked, setting her klert aside. The fox had stopped moving entirely as the last of the candles extinguished, its attention seeming not to focus on anything.

"The Dean wished to meet with you," Scarlett answered.

"Yeah? Well, alright. Consider me at your service, then. Don't have much else to do right now." Rosa gestured towards the creature in front of her. "I've been trying to teach this little rascal some tricks, but it's a slow progress. I only just managed to figure out how to get him to move, and now I'm working on more complex commands. 'Fetch' will be a tricky one."

"It is not a pet, Miss Hale," Scarlett said, motioning with her hand to conjure a fist-sized flame at eye level. The fox's attention snapped to the freshly born flame, and it bounded

towards it. As it neared, the flame swelled in size, nearly doubling as the fox paused underneath, staring at it.

“I don’t know about that,” Rosa replied. “It *looks* like a pet to me, and I’m sticking to that belief. I also refuse to accept that you refuse to accept that when you’re the one who keeps a stone as a companion.”

Scarlett just shook her head, guiding the flame beside her—and, in turn, the fox—as she stopped in front of Rosa.

“While I don’t speak for Baroness Harford, training an Emberling of all things in specific tasks may prove challenging,” Godwin said, his expression one of gentle amusement. “At the very least, if I am not mistaken about that fox’s nature. It is my first time seeing an Emberling for myself, though I have seen Zephyrians. They are all variants of the elementalistic Etherialias, if I am not mistaken.”

Scarlett regarded him for a moment. “My knowledge on this subject is limited, so I can neither confirm nor deny that claim. At the very least, it is clear that the creature is no true spirit, nor does it possess any genuine intelligence.”

The man nodded, stroking his beard thoughtfully while examining the fox. “That aligns with the nature of the Etherialias. Pseudo-spirits, I have heard them referred to. Rare, undoubtedly, and more akin to facsimiles and half-representations of their elements than true, living entities. To think I would encounter one today. It would seem you always find the most unusual of phenomena, Baroness.”

Scarlett observed the fox, which was transfixed by her flame.

Godwin’s description sounded about right.

The creature was a temporary summon from the [Foxfire Charm] Arlene had given her. Although not the adorable pet that Rosa and Allyssa had hoped for when they first saw it, it was a suitable and practical gift for someone like Scarlett. The fox instinctively gravitated towards fire, and its presence enhanced any flames in its direct vicinity.

In the game, it had appeared as a small critter that followed the player around, making it a very good fit for any build that employed close-range pyromancy spells. In this world, it was slightly more flexible since it followed flames instead, and Scarlett already had several ideas for how she could use something like that.

As did Rosa, apparently.

“Where did you come across it?” Godwin asked.

“It was a present from my mentor,” Scarlett replied.

“Mentor?” a hint of surprise entered the man’s voice.

“Yes, my mentor.” Scarlett glanced at him, then turned to address Rosa. “Miss Hale, Dean Godwin is here concerning the events in Bridgespell. He is aware of the Anguish incident and

believes he can help you adapt to the Heartstone. However, he wishes to examine you in further detail first, and I have informed him that your opinion comes first.”

Rosa blinked, eyes moving between Scarlett and Godwin for a couple of seconds before eventually settling on the wizard. “You really think you might be able to help me out?”

The bard didn’t even seem to mind that Scarlett might have shared some of her secrets with Godwin.

“I have extensive knowledge of Zuverian artifacts, like the Astral Soulstone used to create your Heartstone, so it would not be excessive to claim that I am well-placed to offer my assistance,” the man explained. “Apart from masters of demonology or a demon themselves, if there is anyone in this empire who can help you, it would be this old wizard.”

“Huh. Okay, let’s do it,” Rosa agreed readily.

“*Rosa*,” Scarlett interjected. “Please do consider your decision with at least some caution. You are free to decline his request if you wish.”

The bard just shrugged. “I don’t see any reason to. Sure, I’m getting better at controlling this thing myself, but there’s still a bunch of things about the Heartstone that I don’t understand. I wouldn’t mind having someone more knowledgeable than me take a gander at it. Frankly, I feel like I should be grateful he doesn’t see fit to fireball me all the way to the Everdust Barrier and back for having it in me.”

Scarlett bit back a reprimand for Rosa’s casual attitude. She couldn’t exactly say anything when she was the one who brought Godwin here while intending to make use of him.

The wizard in question cleared his throat. “By ‘in you’, I presume I am to take that literally. Where exactly is this ‘Heartstone’?”

Rosa smiled slyly. “Well, it’s in the name, isn’t it?”

“I see.”

“I expect you to not forget your promise to handle this with proper discretion, Dean,” Scarlett said, fixing him with a sharp look. Despite his age, he had the looks of someone who had been a real heartbreaker when he was younger.

“Rest assured, I am quite capable of respecting a woman’s decency when necessary,” the man replied.

“Hear that, Red? Sounds like my virtue is in safe hands.”

Scarlett’s glare shifted in Rosa’s direction, but the woman just responded with an ‘innocent’ grin.

“...Very well. It is hardly my place to interfere.” Scarlett turned back to Godwin. “You can ask my butler to prepare a suitable room for your examination. Do you need anything else?”

He shook his head. "I am equipped with the necessary tools. If Miss Hale finds it agreeable, I'd like to begin promptly. I have other commitments in the evening."

"Sure." Rosa stood, retrieving a fox-shaped charm from her coat and passing it to Scarlett. Scarlett accepted it, using it to mentally dismiss the fiery fox.

"I trust that you will manage on your own with the Dean, Miss Hale," she said, storing the [Foxfire Charm] in her [Pouch of Holding]. "Or at the very least, I hope that you will refrain from creating any trouble that I will need to resolve. I will return to check on you later."

"What, you're not joining in on our little demon séance? It'll be fun," Rosa teased.

"I highly doubt it. Besides, I have other plans that require my attention now that Dean Godwin is here." Scarlett turned her attention to the man. "I would like to employ your magic to teleport to a certain location. You can consider this part of our arrangement for your access to Miss Hale."

"Hey, hold on," Rosa cut in. "I thought this was supposed to be my choice? When did I become a bargaining chip?"

"When it became convenient for me," Scarlett responded bluntly, her focus still on Godwin. "What do you say, Dean?"

Warley Godwin wasn't only a renowned archmage, but he was also very experienced in almost all teleportation magic. His capabilities, while not on par with powerful artifacts like the Kilnstone that could transport hundreds of people every day, were more than sufficient for teleporting a single person over large distances.

Raising both eyebrows, the wizard considered her. "Hmm. Not an unreasonable ask, I suppose, though it will drain a considerable amount of my mana. Where do you wish to go?"

"Are you familiar with Thalindor Outpost?" Scarlett asked.

"On the Resting Eye?"

"Yes."

"I have been there before."

"Excellent. Then I would like for you to bring me there."

It was a location from the game that Scarlett had been considering visiting for a while now, and now was as good a time as any to do so. The visit itself wasn't a *must* for her, but with an archmage's help, she could avoid the tedious journey to Darkshore where she would need to find someone to bring her across a large lake to reach an active volcano. There also weren't any immediate crises looming over her head *quite* yet, and most of her endeavours that required her attention needed more time to yield results.

"That is a rather unusual destination for a noble to visit so suddenly," Godwin noted. "Are you interested in the Zuverian ruins there, or perhaps the Resting Eye itself?"

“Both and neither,” Scarlett replied. “Can you bring me there or not?”

“I can.”

“Then please do so. I assume you can cast *Aetheric Repatriate*? It would be preferable if I did not need your aid to return.”

She’d done her research and knew some of the powerful spells that were available to the most powerful mages. [Aetheric Repatriate] was an aeromancy spell that allowed a round trip teleportation, returning the user to their starting point after a set duration or at the user’s convenience. It was exactly the type of magic Scarlett could only envy Godwin for.

“Wait, are you planning to leave *now*?” Rosa asked. “You’re not going by yourself, right?”

Scarlett looked at the woman, observing her for a moment before responding. “Yes, I will be going alone this time. There is no need to be worried, however. Nothing dangerous dwells on that isle, as the Dean can confirm.”

Rosa turned to Godwin, who nodded his head- “The isle itself poses no threat, at least not to someone of Baroness Hartford’s ability. I would be more concerned if she intended to explore the Resting Eye, but I trust she won’t venture there rashly.”

“I will not,” Scarlett confirmed. “Now, let us proceed without delay. Dean Godwin, you may cast the spell now. I have no need to prepare anything beyond what I currently have.”

Rosa started to speak. “But this still sounds a bit—”

“I will be fine, Rosa,” Scarlett cut her off. “You should focus on your own matters.”

The bard’s previous lightheartedness had faded into a hint of a worried expression, but eventually, she seemed to resignedly accept the situation. “Fine. Not like I can convince you otherwise anyway. But you’re gonna have to explain things to Fynn later. He won’t be pleased about being left behind.”

“I am sure that he will manage.”

While Scarlett could take Fynn along if she wanted, it would probably be easier if she didn’t. Besides, she wasn’t even sure Godwin had the mana to cast [Aetheric Repatriate] on both of them.

With the discussion concluded, Scarlett turned to Godwin as he began preparing the spell. His hands moved with precise gestures, arcane symbols forming in the air, glowing with a soft, ghostly light.

“You may experience some brief disorientation following the teleportation, Baroness, but this is normal,” the man said.

Scarlett braced herself. “I understand.”

“Then I wish you a safe journey.”

As he uttered those words, sparks crackled around his hands. The world around Scarlett twisted and blurred, and suddenly she was plunged into darkness. Moments later, she found herself on a rugged, volcanic beach, feeling like she had just been on an intercontinental flight for twelve hours. In front of her, a vast lake stretched out, its waters dark. Across the lake, she could make out Darkshore, the cityscape faintly dusted with snow on the opposite shore.

It had been a few months since her last visit to the place, but she doubted much had changed other than the weather. The lake did have fewer boats on it, making it appear cold and uninviting, but Darkshore had never really been a maritime city.

Her gaze moved over the rocky shore right in front of her for a moment, eyeing some of the fragments of ice that floated about. She wondered if the lake ever fully froze over here? Probably not.

Turning around, she took some time to survey her surroundings as she waited for the nausea to calm down. In front of her stood the Resting Eye, a towering grey mountain that didn't quite reach the clouds. Its summit spewed thick, dark smoke that painted vast swathes of the sky black.

The isle itself was barren, a landscape of dark, uneven rock formations. The snow was conspicuously absent, apparently unable to find a foothold in this terrain. Scarlett did note that it was warmer here than she would have expected, though it was still cold enough to be uncomfortable.

At least there weren't any strong odors.

Her gaze fell on what appeared to be the remnants of a settlement a few hundred meters to her right, nestled into the base of the volcano. Broken pillars of stone, familiar in design, jutted out from the ground in large numbers.

That had to be Thalindor Outpost. An old Zuverian outpost that had long since been scoured by imperial scholars.

Having found her first destination, Scarlett checked her immediate vicinity. After a brief search, she spotted a thin, translucent crystal that seemed to sparkle with energy on the ground.

That should be her means of returning to the mansion.

Leaning down to pick the crystal up, she then began her trek towards the desolate outpost ahead. Using the [Charms of Expeditious Exchange], she swapped her dress for most of her exploration equipment, which included her new [Ashenwraith Elegance] attire and the [Emberwood Gloves].

Scarlett soon arrived at the outpost, passing under a protruding slab of stone adorned with ancient Zuverian symbols. As she navigated through the ruins, she kept her eyes peeled while pondering what she saw around her.

She'd heard there was a lot of speculation among scholars regarding why the Zuver seemed to favor simple stone so much in their architecture despite their advanced technology. While white marble was also used in some contexts, stone was still predominantly the material you would find in ruins like this. The reason behind this was largely a mystery, even to Scarlett. One possible explanation was that most other materials had simply not survived the Zuverian civilization's fall during The Severance, and the years that had passed since.

Or maybe the game designers had just decided to be lazy when creating their dungeons. It was a bit of a chicken-or-the-egg question as far as Scarlett was concerned.

In the midst of these ruins, her attention was drawn to one section that stood out. Encircled by a ring of stone rubble that looked to have been moved aside by those who had been here before, a solitary obelisk floated, its surface a polished grey with a metallic luster.

This was the outpost's Kilnstone.

Approaching the artifact, Scarlett gently touched her palm against its surface. A ripple of light traveled up the Kilnstone, and she felt an internal connection form. And that was it. Another point added to the personal network of Kilnstones she could access.

Not that she'd had any use for that 'network' yet. It wasn't as though she had access to a Kilnstone that wasn't already in use by the empire. Direct access to the empire's Kilnstones was a privilege reserved for the Imperial Family and select institutions, not a mere baroness.

Still, it didn't hurt to save up on these Kilnstones when she could. If she wanted, she could instantly travel to Fynn's ancestral home in the Whitdown Mountains, for example.

Actually, she *would* have to do that in the future.

She'd have to think about the easiest way of doing that when it was time.

Turning around, Scarlett eyed her surroundings, her gaze settling on the volcano that loomed nearby. After some brief contemplation, she decided it was time to get moving again.

As she prepared to leave for her next destination, a noise from behind a stone the size of a house caught her attention.

She frowned. There shouldn't be anyone here since this site had little left to offer to most people.

Equipping the [Tiara of Benediction] and her remaining gear, she cautiously approached the stone. Then, the shadow near the stone began to morph, coalescing into a distinct form.

It took Scarlett a moment to recognize what she was seeing, but when she did, she immediately retrieved a dagger and the [Essence of Enthas] from her [Pouch of Holding], positioning the blade's edge against The Angler Man's heart.

From the shadow, a single figure emerged, shrouded by a crimson robe, with a white mask visible beneath a hood. Strands of pale blonde hair framed the mask, which bore three

lavender eyes on it — two with large, semi-transparent irises and tiny black pupils, and the third eye positioned vertically on the forehead.

Scarlett stared at the girl.

What the hell was one of the Hallowed Cabal's agents doing here?