

234: The Rising Isle

The carriage rolled into the expansive, circular plaza surrounding Freybrook's Kilnstone, with Scarlett and the others peering out the windows at the bustling lanes. The coachman navigated directly past the queues leading towards the marble structure at the plaza's heart, attracting the attention of many of those waiting.

"So, what do you think it'll be like?" Allyssa's voice sounded from across Scarlett in the cabin.

"Watery," Rosa replied crisply.

"It's an island. That's a given. I mean the parts *beyond* the obvious."

"Quintessentially islandy, I'd wager."

Allyssa sighed in mock frustration. "Ugh. You're impossible sometimes, Rosa."

The bard laughed in response. "Occasionally, yeah. I need to balance all of this excessive charm oozing out of my pores somehow, don't I? Otherwise, who knows how much of a threat I'll become to society at large? It beggars the imagination."

Scarlett turned to observe Rosa, impressed by how casually she could speak such nonsense.

"Why would you be a threat?" Fynn asked. "I thought the demon wasn't a problem anymore?"

The cabin fell silent briefly, followed by Allyssa's awkward cough.

Rosa simply smiled broadly, however. "I'm glad that some things about you never change, our dearest Fynn, even with this despotic taskmaster of a boss trying to corrupt that pure little spirit of yours."

Scarlett frowned.

"That's not an answer," Fynn pointed out.

"Well, you can see it like this," Rosa said, gently patting him on the head and ruffling his hair. "Too much of anything becomes a poison, right? And since my charm is already as infectious and overwhelming as it is, picture how chaotic it would get if I took it up a few notches or three. We'd have people fainting left and right at my sheer presence."

Fynn looked puzzled. "That doesn't make any sense."

Rosa maintained her smile. "It certainly doesn't."

"My Lady, we have arrived," the coachman announced from the front as he halted the carriage.

Scarlett diverted her attention from the group's banter and gazed outside. They had stopped just before the half-open building housing the Kilnstone, with the ancient Zuverian artifact visible through an array of marble columns.

"Then let us not waste any time," she declared, rising out of her seat and stepping out of the vehicle into the snow-blanketed cobblestone street. Almost instinctually, she used her pyrokinesis to fend off the biting cold, having not bothered putting on warmer clothes, considering where they were going.

Ignoring the lines on either side of the Kilnstone—one for noble households and the like, and the other for commoners—she moved forward.

An official, dressed in a crisp black uniform and spectacles, approached them, clipboard in hand. "Are you Baroness Scarlett Hartford?" he asked with a professional demeanor.

She nodded. "I am."

"Then please wait here for a moment." He extracted a watch from his breast pocket to check the time before walking towards the Kilnstone where his colleagues were gathered.

"Looks like we're getting the special treatment and all," Rosa remarked, stepping up beside Scarlett.

Without turning, Scarlett replied, "Imperial nobles seldom visit the Rising Isle. The Imperial Chancellery wanted to ensure there are no mishaps on our journey."

"That's what I said. Special treatment."

"...I suppose you are not wrong."

As officials directed those in the queues to pause while guiding a newly arrived cluster of carriages and wagons off to the side, the official from before soon approached Scarlett again. "It is time. If you and your group could approach the Kilnstone, we'll commence the transport process soon."

Following his instructions, Scarlett and the others left the carriage and made their way between the marble pillars, stopping in front of the Kilnstone. Suspended in midair, the artifact's smooth, grey surface gleamed under the sunlight filtering through the columns.

"This'll be my first time traveling by Kilnstone without taking a carriage," Allyssa said, wrapping her cape tighter to combat the chill. "I wonder if it'll feel any different."

"It won't," Shin replied casually, dressed a lot lighter than his fellow Shielder.

"And how can you be certain?" Allyssa asked.

"That's not how Kilnstones work."

"You don't know that."

“I do.”

“Then how does—”

“I suggest you leave the debate for later,” Scarlett interrupted the two, glancing briefly at them.

Allyssa offered an apologetic look, while Shin appeared unfazed.

“Prepare yourselves,” the official instructed as he walked past Scarlett’s group, ensuring everyone was positioned within the designated area.

A few moments passed, then the Kilnstone surface darkened, engulfing all nearby light and turning Scarlett’s world black. A split-second later, it then abruptly released all that light again as a spectrum of colors that repainted their surroundings with a new scenery.

Scarlett found herself overlooking a vast expanse of water. A boundless ocean extending endlessly to the horizon, as though hugging the world’s end.

The Innisling Sea, located south of the empire.

The view was a dramatic shift from the urban landscape she had just left.

She found herself on the brink of a stone platform, facing a sheer and steep drop to the sea below, where the water was a hive of activity, churning and frothing outwards like a torrent. The ocean further out, however, was calm and reflective. There was a distinct boundary between the two bodies of water, where the former merged smoothly into the latter along some invisible circular barrier.

Behind Scarlett, voices of awe sounded out. Turning, she took in the sight they were marveling at.

It was indeed a spectacle.

The Rising Isle lay spread out before them like a grand tapestry, a breathtaking blend of architectural ingenuity and natural beauty, where man-made and the natural environment seemed to intertwine seamlessly.

The city itself—if it could be called that—was more a symphony of design than a mere collection of buildings, suspended beside and above the azure ocean. Crystal-clear waterways teeming with vibrant marine life snaked through the landscape, acting as picturesque channels for any seafaring vehicles to pass through. Islands with high cliffs and lots of vegetation were separated by terraces of cascading waterfalls and hosted buildings overlooking the canals like sentinels of a bygone era, their reflections shimmering in the waters below.

Scarlett recognized the more traditional Zuverian elements mixed in throughout a blend of more contemporary architecture.

From their vantage point, a single elevated bridge extended from their platform, filled with clear, peaceful water and stretching towards the city, arching over the island's lowest tier where all waterfalls converged. The bridge provided a direct path to the heart of the isle, threading through several of its more prominent structures.

Notably, all signs of winter were gone here. Instead, the climate was mild, and a gentle breeze wafted over them where they stood at the outer edge of the Isle. It was as if this place was nestled within an immense greenhouse, shielded from the harsher elements outside.

A slight frown crossed Scarlett's face as she looked around. Actually, why were they on this particular platform? If she recalled correctly, the Rising Isle's Kilnstone was located near the center of the Isle in the game.

Looking down, she noticed that some sort of rune was etched into the stone of the platform. Did they redirect her group's landing spot just for impact's sake?

Her gaze returned to the sight of the city before her.

...She supposed that she couldn't exactly blame them. The view was undeniably stunning, even more so than depicted in the game.

"Baroness Hartford, welcome. We are pleased to host you here with us." A man adorned in dignified grey robes, marked by several ornate gold lines at the collar, greeted her as he approached with two similarly attired mages walking behind him.

Scarlett shifted her focus from the impressive scenery to the man. "Thank you. I am glad to be here. The descriptions do not do the Rising Isle's splendor justice."

"You honor us with your words, Baroness. It seems your entourage shares your sentiment." He showed an approving smile as he regarded Scarlett's group before looking back at her. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Principal Wizard Bunce, and with me are Associate Wizards Atterton and Rudes. We have been assigned to assist you with whatever you may require today."

Scarlett studied the other two mages—a man and a woman in their early twenties—noting that their robes didn't have as many golden lines on the collar. While she couldn't quite remember the Rising Isle's ranking system, it would probably be enough to look at people's clothes to get a general idea.

After exchanging greetings, Bunce led them towards the platform's end, where a spacious gondola awaited, ready to carry them across the bridge towards the city.

"If you would," the man said, motioning towards the gondola.

They boarded, with Bunce taking a position near Scarlett at the front, and the two Associate Wizards boarding last after the others. The vessel then smoothly embarked.

"As some of you may know," Bunce began, "The Rising Isle was once a pivotal seat of power for the ancient Zuver, and it remains the most intact and profound relic of their civilisations to this day. It was wholly inaccessible to our hands until Arch Wizard Aubrianne

the Enlightened deciphered the mystery behind its seclusion four centuries ago, transforming it into the beacon of magical knowledge it is now.”

“Only four centuries? I thought the Rising Isle had been around for longer than that,” Allyssa said. “I mean, the current Rising Isle, with the mages and all.”

Bunce nodded. “We have not, but I understand that is a common misconception among some of those in the empire. You do not often focus on the times before your own nation was founded, so in comparison, it seems as if the Isle is older than it is.”

A slight frown showed on Allyssa’s face at the comment, but the man continued.

“But that is not to say that we do not have plenty of history as is. The past four centuries have been marked by significant changes and advancements, particularly in the first century following Arch Wizard Aubrianne’s breakthrough. That era revolutionized all magical disciplines, with our predecessors of those days successfully solving the mysteries held by numerous Zuverian artifacts. In fact, much of what we know now in regards to our discipline can be traced back to that time. Arguably, it is one of the most pivotal eras in the last millennia.”

Rosa let out a low whistle as she leaned relaxedly against the gondola’s side, letting her hand trail through the cool water beneath it. “I used to hear the old priests where I grew up say the same about the Renascence in the empire. Guess they were a bit full of themselves. It sounds like you folks had some impressive people running around back then.”

“Oh, most certainly,” Bunce said. “Figures like Arch Wizard Blythe the discerning, who was among the first to establish the current schools as they are, and Arch Wizard Neuveville the Judicious, who presided over a myriad of factional disputes, were plentiful. Arch Wizard Aubrianne, naturally, stood at the forefront of much of this progress, unveiling more of the Zuvers’ secrets than any other.”

Shin, turning away from appreciating the view around them, looked at the wizard. “I read that Aubrianne might herself have been of Zuver descent. Is it true that this might have been a factor in her success?”

Bunce offered a thoughtful smile. “There are those who claim as much, but it remains dubious whether that theory holds any truth to it. As far as we are aware, there is no concrete evidence that there remain any living traces of the Zuver, nor can we be certain that such a lineage would be of any aid in unraveling the enigmas they left behind. Most likely, Aubrianne’s success was simply due to her exceptional intelligence and wizardly dedication.”

Shin nodded. “I see.”

Bunce went on to delve even deeper into the Isle’s history as their gondola continued towards the city, while Scarlett tuned most of that conversation out, observing their surroundings.

Soon, their vessel glided beneath a pair of towering statues flanking a grand structure ahead of them. The bridge’s waterway went through the central part of the building, which expanded outward in a wide semicircle. Its facade boasted a mix of intricate designs and towering spires with thick buttresses and pointed arches.

“What’s this place?” Allyssa asked, looking up as they moved beneath the tall structure, momentarily engulfed in its shadow. The girl had long since stowed her cape away in the [Bag of Juham] that Fynn was carrying.

“This is the Arcanum Spire,” Bunce informed them. “It houses an extensive collection of magical research and literature, and it is arguably the grandest library of arcane texts in the world. Though outsiders may not enter, its exterior alone is quite the sight, wouldn’t you agree?”

“It looks pretty impressive, at least. But are you sure about that whole ‘grandest’ business?”

“Quite. For while it may look big even from outside, I can assure you it is even larger on the inside.”

“Oh.”

As they moved past the Arcanum Spire, more of the Isle revealed itself, and they could see several larger islands and various buildings that had been obscured before. The bridge they’d been following soon transitioned into the city’s network of wide natural waterways, allowing them to weave through the islands, passing other gondolas along the way.

“How come there are so many boats moving about here?” Rosa asked. “I’d think wizards would have more...direct methods of travel. The last one I met just teleported wherever he wanted.”

Bunce responded with another smile. “The available spells vary greatly among different schools and practitioners. Not all are versed in or capable of teleportation or flight, for example. For the majority, really, more mundane means of travel is the most practical method.” He waved to a small group of robed mages in a nearby gondola. “We do utilize certain artifacts for faster travel over the Isle, like smaller Kilnstones, but I believe there is a general preference for these vessels when the circumstances allow. It is rather calming, after all. Additionally, we must accommodate the non-mage residents of the Isle, who may not have the same access as the rest of us.”

“Are there many non-mages here?” Allyssa asked. “I heard that there used to be fewer before.”

The wizard nodded. “That is true, in part. There was once a time where the Rising Isle did not allow any who were not a mage to step foot on it, though that has changed. Now, roughly a quarter of those who call this place home are non-mages.”

“And how many people live here?”

“Around six thousand.”

“What?!” Allyssa seemed shocked by that number. “But this place looks to be at least as big as Freybrook or some other cities in the empire. How can there only be six thousand people here?”

Both of Bunce's eyebrows rose as he studied her. "Most express surprise upon learning of our substantial mage population, so it is curious that is not your first question. To give you an answer, however, appearances can be deceiving. While the Isle's size might rival that of many imperial cities, a significantly larger portion of it than you realise consists of water and uninhabitable terrain. Despite its vast appearance, our living space is rather limited."

"A fact I suspect the empire has found much comfort in," Scarlett remarked casually. "The notion of an island steeped in Zuverian secrets and inhabited by a veritable army of skilled mages presents a formidable image. If the Rising Isle were larger, it is uncertain if peace between it and the empire would have endured in the past when relations between the two were more fraught."

The wizard looked at her with slight shock, making Scarlett reconsider whether that comment of hers might have been a tad inappropriate, considering her role here. After a moment, however, the man nodded along.

"You might be right, Baroness. The size of our Isle has often shown to be neither too large nor too small in the past, and that is something to be thankful for. It is one of the reasons we can govern ourselves as we are, unburdened by the many bureaucratic and hierarchic machinations so prevalent on the mainland."

Scarlett held back a slight frown from appearing on her face. She wasn't sure if that was supposed to be a slight dig at the aristocracy or not, but she also didn't think it should matter.

Choosing to change the topic, she spoke. "I was informed that, upon my arrival, I would be allowed to meet with one of your Council's members in the Chamber of Conjunction who would serve as my intermediary during my stay here. I was not told who this was, however, and I presume it is not you, so may I ask who it is?"

Adalicia had recommended her to find a 'Magister Penney', who was both one of the Isle's more influential wizards and apparently relatively agreeable. She doubted he would be her official liaison, however, so she was curious who it would be instead. Hopefully, it was someone she could work with.

Principal Wizard Bunce let out an uncomfortable chuckle, wearing an awkward smile that Scarlett decidedly did *not* like. "Well, Baroness, this is actually a rather intriguing coincidence. Since your presence here is related to your Zuverian research, the Council chose someone based on his expertise on the Zuver. It just so happens that he also shares a name with you. It is Grand Wizard Hartford."