

## 239: The inner sanctum

Scarlett surveyed the lineup of robed wizards in front of her and Grand Wizard Hartford within the Astral Sanctum, studying their faces. They were all Senior Wizards or Principal Wizards, which meant they were skilled enough, but she had expected at least one Grand Wizard or Arch Wizard.

Her eyes settled momentarily on the purple-haired wizard at the end of the line before she turned to address Gaspar. “Are you certain that this assembly meets the requirements I gave you?” she asked.

“I am,” the man replied firmly.

Scarlett considered him for a brief moment. “...Very well. Then shall we commence?”

She cast a final look at the line of wizards, then shifted her gaze upwards, admiring the myriad of scenes adorning the dome of the chamber’s ceiling, each depicting a different location of interest.

The Zuver certainly loved their puzzles.

To players, this particular dungeon had never been overly important. There were other dungeons on the Isle that had better loot and were more relevant to quests. That said, it did stick out due to the simple fact that you had to have progressed pretty far in the game in order to even access it.

Realizing that none of the wizards had started moving despite her words, she gestured to Gaspar to get things started. He gave her one last, skeptical look, then directed the wizards according to how Scarlett had told him.

“Marlowe, assume your position before the Resting Eye mural. Whiteley, to the Ever-reaching Grotto. Tattersall will take the White Forest, and Rudge the Sunken Crypt.” The man systematically dispatched the orders before eventually reaching the purple-haired wizard, Yamina, where he seemed to pause for a moment. “...Senior Wizard Yamina, the Forgotten Tower falls under your responsibility.”

Scarlett’s eyes followed as Yamina crossed the chamber to stop underneath the artwork depicting a tower emerging amidst a tumultuous sea, its surrounding waters in a perpetual storm.

“Position your hands on the markings within the murals,” Gaspar instructed.

The wizards complied, turning to the murals directly beneath the depictions they stood under and touching the stone. Nothing happened, but that was to be expected.

Gaspar turned to Scarlett. “Baroness, if you would take your place.”

Scarlett walked over to the last empty mural, situated beneath the fresco that illustrated the highest peak in the Whitdown Mountains. There, she pressed her hand against the cold stone.

A few seconds passed, then an echoing rumble reverberated throughout the space. Suddenly, a section of the floor at the chamber's center became translucent, revealing a staircase descending between walls adorned with ancient Zuver figures.

The large group of observing wizards who had retreated to the chamber's entrance to keep an eye on the proceedings let out sounds of surprise and amazement, while Scarlett allowed a slight smile to appear on her lips.

The reason this puzzle could take so long to complete is that it was related to the Kilnstone network, and in the game, you had to complete it on your own. Each location depicted on the ceiling was associated with at least one Kilnstone, and it only activated when an individual who had visited the corresponding Kilnstone made contact with the mural beneath it. Doing that for all of the murals within a certain time frame opened the dungeon.

This puzzle was made extra difficult by the fact that some of those locations were pretty remote. But since this was the Rising Isle, it shouldn't come as a surprise that they had wizards who had visited most of these places.

The only shocking thing here, even for the Rising Isle, was related to the Forgotten Tower's Kilnstone. It was widely believed to be completely inaccessible and had been for centuries, with few even being aware it had a Kilnstone. Moreover, the Kilnstone itself was inactive most of the time, so actually reaching the place was practically impossible.

Scarlett hadn't been worried, though, since she knew that there was one wizard on the Isle who *had* visited the Tower, despite all that.

Her eyes once more turned towards Yamina, who returned her gaze easily.

Scarlett began crossing the chamber towards the newly revealed entrance, pausing to stand beside Gaspar, who was looking down the staircase. Fynn, who had been waiting near the mouth of the chamber, caught up to her, stopping behind Scarlett.

The expression on Gaspar's face could only be described as a blend of restrained excitement and prideful stubbornness, although he didn't say anything to Scarlett as he turned to address all the wizards in the chamber. "Prepare yourselves. We are moving forward immediately."

Scarlett noted that Yamina moved with the rest of the wizards, still acting like a part of the group as they congregated around the new passage.

Would it be rude of Scarlett to point out the ridiculousness of a Senior Wizard supposedly having been to the Forgotten Tower? Maybe. She'd leave it for now, at least.

Soon, they began their descent, with Gaspar and Scarlett moving close to the front. The stairs were wide enough to allow six people to move side by side, illuminated by green crystals embedded in the walls and watched over by the silent stares of the carved Zuver figures.

Hopefully, this endeavour would demonstrate to the Rising Isle what Scarlett had to offer. For her part, this dungeon served mostly as a means for her to assess the Isle's commitment to a potential collaboration. She had yet to make any real, explicit negotiations or demands for compensation, but that would come later.

For now, she was even willing to give up the loot in this dungeon. She couldn't recall its exact contents, but she felt relatively confident that it wasn't anything of immediate importance to her.

The descent lasted roughly five minutes before they arrived at the bottom of the passage. There, they were greeted by a vast, mostly barren expanse of grey stone, marked only by an entrance at the far end and a solitary, immense figure stationed in the center. This figure, a construct forged out of dull gray steel and standing as tall as six adults stacked, knelt on one knee like a statue, but one look was enough to tell that it wasn't to be toyed with.

Compared to the constructs Scarlett had encountered before, this one was probably several times as formidable.

She cast a sidelong glance at Gaspar, noting his focused examination of the construct. It seemed like he might have some previous experience with this kind of thing.

"Do you believe you can handle it?" Scarlett asked.

Given the rather significant number of seasoned wizards that were trailing behind them, it would be strange if they *couldn't* deal with this much.

"Of course," the man responded, giving Scarlett a brief look before signaling for her and Fynn to step aside. Scarlett didn't mind it, not having intended to show her full abilities quite yet anyhow.

Gaspar directed a select group of wizards, donned in emerald robes with Yamina among them, to step to the front. Without looking directly at the woman, he ordered them to survey the vicinity for wards and concealed threats or mechanisms that could deactivate such threats.

The group began casting their spells—presumably a variant of analytical and divination magic—while Scarlett watched from the side.

Usually, her party would have opted for a more direct approach and simply destroyed the construct since there were no evident weaknesses nearby. But she supposed the Rising Isle would place more importance on preserving constructs like this whenever feasible.

A few minutes ticked by without the wizards identifying any hidden dangers, and from what Scarlett overheard, the construct didn't appear to have any obvious means for deactivating it. Gaspar seemed disappointed by that, but he promptly arranged for the rest of the wizards to position themselves strategically at the chamber's entrance, ready to deal with the construct by force.

What followed could barely be called a fight.

The second the wizards began casting their offensive magic, the construct stirred from its inert state, rising to its full, imposing height, and for a moment, it seemed like an impressive battle would ensue. Before it could do anything more, however, it was bombarded by a relentless onslaught of spells—a spectacular array consisting of fireballs, lightning, rays of light, and other elemental forces—that slammed into its massive frame like a tidal wave.

To its credit, the construct managed to endure the initial assault mostly unscathed. But taking on consecutive volleys of such intensity, cast without a pause, proved too much, and within a minute, it had crumbled into a pile of smoldering, twisted metal.

Scarlett was honestly disappointed at how short the encounter was. She'd hoped to see a bit more of what 'Grand Wizard' Hartford and 'Senior Wizard' Yamina were capable of, but the former stuck to simpler spells, while the latter didn't even join in the fray.

The wizards soon began advancing into the room, with Scarlett and Fynn following. Gaspar had some of his people examine the defeated construct and the surrounding chamber, and only when he was satisfied did they continue on.

To say that their progress from there was slow would probably be an exaggeration, but it was certainly *methodical*. Gaspar had them proceed with deliberate care, with Yamina and the other emerald-robed mages periodically casting their spells for signs of any danger or spots of note.

Their journey eventually led them to another spacious chamber, this time guarded by two constructs instead of one. Scarlett noted Gaspar's slight irritation as he directed his people to apply the same tactics as before, and it wasn't long before these new threats had been dealt with as well.

The advance continued in that fashion for a while, navigating through a series of largely barren passageways and past various constructs that would have taken Scarlett's own party god-knows-how much time to handle. Finally, they reached the end of the dungeon, stepping into a vast hall bathed in an ethereal luminescence.

The air itself seemed to thrum with latent energy here, centering around a grand circular platform. The platform's intricate design glowed with a soft, pulsating light, surrounded by an elaborate array of runes and luminous trails etched deep into its surface, forming intricate patterns and geometric configurations. Above, the chamber's ceiling vanished into an otherworldly expanse, where a mesmerising constellation of lights danced a silent dance, cascading down like celestial ribbons.

The chamber's walls were flanked by towering pillars, each meticulously carved as if to fit some grand schema. Between these pillars, the stone itself seemed alive, shimmering with exceedingly complex characters that ran down to the floor to extend across the chamber and intertwine the entire space in a web of arcane energy.

Around Scarlett, several impressed murmurs sounded out as the assembly of wizards took in the sight.

Perhaps somewhat disappointingly, there was no last boss waiting for them here, but Scarlett was fairly sure the same went for the game. The mobs they had encountered were supposed to be challenging enough by themselves. They just hadn't been enough to deal with a small army of experienced wizards.

"There are those who have posited that the Astral Sanctum alone could not create the barriers and wards around the Rising Isle," Yamina's voice, calm and clear, resonated from nearby.

“Instead, they have suggested that there might exist a hidden nexus for them somewhere on the Isle. It appears we’ve now confirmed those theories.”

Scarlett caught Gaspar looking at her with an indecipherable expression. She met his gaze firmly.

“It seems I have delivered what I promised,” she said.

The man scoffed lightly before turning his attention back to the chamber, instructing Yamina and the others to analyse the space before proceeding. Somewhat surprisingly, none of their spells worked within the confines of this chamber though, dissolving as soon as they were cast.

It seemed like there were still protections placed in this place.

“A precaution to ensure nothing interferes with the wards, presumably,” Gaspar concluded, a frown marking his brow. “...Proceed with due caution, and do not disturb the runes. Tattersall, survey the right side while Marlow is in charge of the left. I will take the platform.”

The large gathering of wizards moved forward, slowly flowing into the chamber while avoiding the runes and glowing veins etched into the floor. Scarlett instructed Fynn to do the same, even though she was pretty sure nothing would happen even if they didn’t. Better safe than sorry.

Most of the wizards quickly got to examining the sights in the chamber, some even taking out journals to start taking notes. Gaspar and some of the others moved to inspect the large platform at the center, careful not to step onto it but closely starting to inspect it from all angles.

As for Scarlett, her focus drifted to a set of altars at the chamber’s end, which she supposed carried the dungeon’s loot.

Seeing them like this before her, she found her earlier resolve to disregard them completely wavering slightly. But the Isle probably wouldn’t like it if she suddenly started claiming them outright, even despite her role in uncovering this place.

That was fine. She’d just make up for any lost loot in other ways.

She just had to tell herself that.

Her thoughts paused momentarily as she spotted something lying on the ground, narrowly missed by an oblivious wizard eager to analyse a collection of nearby runes.

The item looked like a bracelet of sorts, crafted from a dark iron and with copper highlights, its surface a complex network of engravings, patterns, and symbols.

Scarlett frowned slightly, stepping over to the item. Kneeling down to pick it up, she drew puzzled glances from a couple of wizards, but curiously, none of them seemed to directly notice the bracelet itself.

She stood, turning the object over in her hands for a closer inspection. Prominent on its face was a tiny metal globe set within a copper framework. Encircling this, a ring—almost like the bezel on a watch—held two trembling pointers, one longer and one shorter, both pointing towards the top of the ring where a small gem was affixed. Even to Scarlett’s untrained eyes, it was clear that this device was an intricate piece of craftsmanship.

She studied the symbols etched along its band, which were clearly Zuver in origin, puzzled over its function.

**[Orrery of Dissonant Convergence (Unique)]**

{Crafted through ancient artifice long since forgotten, this mysterious device resonates with hidden energies beyond the veil of the mundane world}

Her eyes widened. It was possible she just wasn’t remembering it correctly, but she didn’t think this was from the game...

Adjusting the device slightly, Scarlett noticed the shorter pointer’s faint, responsive quivers, shifting slightly along the rim of the outer bezel. Moving it again, the pointer returned to the top.

Ignoring the wizards eyeing her, she continued experimenting with the bracelet—or rather, the ‘Orrery’—in order to figure out what it was. Unlike most other artifacts she’d dealt with, she couldn’t seem to establish a link to this one, nor did it seem to give her any kind of apparent buffs or effects.

Suddenly, when she oriented the piece in a certain direction, the shorter pointer shifted noticeably, wobbling as it pointed roughly at one o’clock. Following its aim, she didn’t find anything noteworthy, but she did note that the longer pointer was currently aiming at Yamina, who stood a short distance away inspecting a complex arrangement of runes set into a pillar.

Forehead creasing in thought, Scarlett tried rotating the long pointer towards another wizard. Subsequently, the short pointer almost immediately returned to its original position and stopped wobbling.

Aiming at some of the other wizards gave much the same result, but it was different when she pointed it at Gaspar. Then, the short pointer shifted roughly to two o’clock.

Scarlett stared at the Orrery for a few seconds.

What *was* this?

Gaspar seemed to notice her attention on him after a while, signaling with a hand gesture for her to come over. With the Orrery still clutched in her hand, Scarlett approached, stopping in front of him while anticipating the man to ask about the artifact.

However, the question never came. Gaspar’s attention was solely focused on her face. “Is there something on your mind, Baroness?”

Scarlett’s eyebrow rose. “...No, nothing at all.”

“Then why...” He paused, a frown creasing his features before he gave a dismissive shake of his head. “Regardless, the discovery of this place is more than sufficient evidence of the accuracy of your claims. If it suits you, we’ll discuss in further detail what other knowledge you have to offer and negotiate the terms surrounding them. I am sure you have much to ask of us.”

**[Quest completed: Cleared the Astral Sanctum]**

**{Skill points awarded: 10}**

Scarlett spared the notification only a fleeting glance before returning her focus to the artifact in her palm, seeing its pointer persistently fluctuating while aiming at Gaspar. Then, lifting her eyes to meet his once more, she nodded. “Indeed. There is much to discuss, and even more mysteries to unravel.”