

245: Odd signs

The final room in the Veiled Library wasn't anywhere near as vast as the main chamber, but it was still decently large. Its design echoed that of the main chamber, featuring numerous stone shelves arrayed in neat rows, but with wider aisles and lacking those librarians that were drifting around.

Instead, however, at the center of the room, a lone, towering figure commanded attention. It wore grey robes similar to those of the librarians but was significantly taller and had a gangly build. A hood shrouded its face in shadow, and its robes veiled its limbs, but its presence didn't feel quite as ephemeral as the librarians'.

Fynn observed the figure closely. "This one is different from the others."

"I think we got that," Rosa said with a hint of sarcasm. Meanwhile, Allyssa and Shin readied themselves for another potential conflict.

Next to Scarlett, Yamina appeared thoughtful. "I believe this may be the entity that oversaw those librarians. Unlike them, I can detect a faint flow of mana from it, though it is very peculiar."

"It's not alive." Fynn frowned slightly. "...I think."

"So it's like one of those undead Zuver we've encountered before?" Allyssa asked.

Fynn shook his head. "No. Those smell different."

"Then what is it?"

"It might be that this is supposed to be the custodian of this library." Yamina pulled out her spellbook, casting a series of what appeared to be diagnostic spells. "Its nature is unlike any construct known to me, but I cannot tell what else it might be."

Allyssa, holding a vial with a radiant silver liquid inside, eyed the 'custodian'. "Could it be like one of those infused Aurenthials used by the Followers?"

"I do not think the comparison is that straightforward," Yamina said.

The towering figure shifted its stance slightly, its attention seeming to turn towards them where they lingered at the room's threshold. Still, it didn't make any overt moves.

"What's it doing?" Rosa asked.

"I believe it is simply observing us," Scarlett answered.

"Is that a good or a bad thing? If it's the one that's been controlling those librarian fellows we fought on our way here, it might not be the most welcoming of our presence here."

"Perhaps." Scarlett considered the custodian for a few seconds, then stepped into the chamber, prompting surprised looks from the others. The custodian, however, didn't react at all.

There was a brief period of silence among them.

“...Okay, is *that* a good or a bad thing?” Rosa asked.

“I do not know,” Scarlett answered, though she did have a decent enough guess. She turned to Fynn. “Fynn, if you would.”

On her cue, the young man advanced into the room, starting to approach the custodian while ready for any sudden attacks. However, it remained passive until, eventually, Fynn came to a halt directly before it, receiving nothing but a silent stare.

Rosa moved closer to Scarlett, giving her a questioning look. “Any idea why it’s not attacking?”

“It might no longer perceive us as intruders,” Scarlett said.

“...Alright, not *quite* sure I follow the logic in that.”

Yamina also turned towards Scarlett. “Are you suggesting that its role might be to ward off intruders, yet consider those who reach this point as guests?”

Scarlett nodded. “It is a possibility. The Zuver’s methods do not always operate within our conventional logic.”

Their incessant obsession with puzzles showed that much.

She also knew for a fact that, in the game, this custodian only retaliated if provoked or if you damaged any of the works here. And while it was supposed to be the Veiled Library’s boss, facing it in combat was optional.

Yamina seemed to consider it. “That’s an intriguing suggestion. I think you may at least partly be correct.”

Scarlett began leading the group across the room towards Fynn and the tall figure, treading somewhat carefully. Pausing in front of it, they noticed the custodian’s head tilt slightly to regard them.

Up close, Scarlett could see hints of a face beneath its dark hood — pale grey skin etched with sharp features, crowned by a pair of eerie green eyes that considered her closely. Somehow, one look was enough for her to *know* that, while this thing bore the visage of being alive, it wasn’t. But it didn’t feel entirely artificial either.

It was something in between.

On her wrist, Scarlett caught a slight flicker of movement from the Orrery. Adjusting it slightly to point at the custodian, she observed the short pointer rotate roughly a quarter around the bezel.

“That’s kinda creepy,” she overheard Allyssa murmur to Shin behind her, though the custodian hardly cared, its focus remaining on Scarlett.

With a puzzled frown, Scarlett examined the Orrery more closely. She hadn’t been expecting it to react to the custodian. What did that mean?

“Some of its features appear to resemble those of the Zuver, but not quite,” Yamina observed. “If it predates The Severance, it is likely artificial in some fashion. It could be a relic of experimentation left behind by one of the diviniarchs, which would explain why it’s unlike anything we have encountered before.”

The woman moved closer to the tall figure, several runes floating around her. At this point, she didn’t even seem slightly worried about a potential attack.

“So, are we just going to stand here gawking at it?” Rosa asked, sweeping her gaze over the area. “Do any of you think it’d get mad if we started exploring some of the books here?”

Allyssa glanced over at her, then peered down one of the nearest aisles. “Even if it didn’t mind, there are still a lot of books here. How do we find anything useful? And if this really is the library’s forbidden section, maybe it’d be a good idea to be careful with the works here.”

“True. You never know if you open up a manual on impressionist gardening only to be turned into a frog.”

“Although I do not think that particular scenario is especially likely, we could perhaps simplify matters by asking for guidance,” Scarlett said, her eyes still locked on the custodian. She wanted to learn more about why the Orrery was reacting to it, but she didn’t know how.

“Yeah? And how do you propose we do that?” Rosa eyed her.

Scarlett finally turned away from the custodian to meet the woman’s gaze briefly. “...We have the Library’s custodian at our disposal, do we not?” She then returned her attention to address it directly. “Does this section contain any works relating to the Forgotten Tower?”

The custodian silently regarded her with its penetrating gaze. After a moment, it turned and started down an aisle, its robes trailing behind it. Scarlett received a few surprised looks from the others, but she simply motioned for them to follow.

Stopping before one of the stone shelves, the custodian looked back at Scarlett, lifting its gangly arm to gesture towards a collection of books.

“These are what you have available that concern the Forgotten Tower?” she asked, examining the titles on the spines.

It had indicated five different tomes, each bearing the marks of age.

Yamina joined her, selecting one of the books and flipping it open, looking through its pages with keen interest. Her eyebrows rose after a short while. “...This appears to be a compendium on the Stormheart anomaly that centers on the Forgotten Tower. Although it doesn’t speak of its origins, it does seem to relate a method to replicate a similar effect.”

“Really?” Allyssa leaned in, peering at the book with a mix of curiosity and apprehension. “Isn’t that supposed to be responsible for catching most storms in the western empire? Replication *that* would be scary.”

Yamina nodded seriously while considering the book’s contents. “Indeed it would.”

"I imagine this must be of particular interest to you, Miss Ward, given you have already visited the Forgotten Tower," Scarlett said.

"Wait, what?" This caught everybody in the group by surprise, with Allyssa and the others turning to look at the wizard.

Yamina glanced up, meeting Scarlett's eyes. "...You're not wrong. However, this type of magic is beyond my usual scope. Many of my fellow wizards would be fascinated by it, though, if they were given the opportunity to explore here." Her focus shifted to the custodian, who watched them silently. "Now, I'm curious what other secrets this place holds."

"Why not ask?"

Scarlett's request to find materials on the Forgotten Tower was more of a test than anything. Although the Tower did pique her interest, she wouldn't be able to go there anytime soon, and her immediate goal lay elsewhere.

That said, she was also intrigued by what Yamina was looking for here. She assumed the woman was searching for something in particular, after all.

After a moment of reflection, Yamina carefully replaced the book on the shelf and adjusted her gold-rimmed glasses higher on her nose. She then turned to address the custodian. "Could you direct me to any documents concerning the Tribute of Dominion?"

Scarlett looked at her with slight surprise.

She was investigating the Tribute of Dominion?

That was...somewhat unexpected. While perhaps not entirely unforeseen, Scarlett wondered what about the Tribute had caught the woman's attention. As far as she was aware, barely anyone in the empire even knew what it was, let alone understood its significance.

The custodian started moving, leading the group through the forbidden section's tiny maze of aisles. Eventually, they stopped before another shelf, where the custodian pointed out several titles.

Yamina approached the indicated books with a keen interest, carefully selecting the first title to examine. Scarlett and the others stood to the side, watching as the wizard took on a concentrated expression.

"Is there a particular reason why you are seeking information on the Tribute of Dominion?" Scarlett asked after a while.

Without looking up, Yamina responded, "There are several."

"Such as?"

"Scholarly curiosity," the woman said, offering a single glance at Scarlett. "And the others are quite personal."

Scarlett raised an eyebrow. Personal? The Tribute of Dominion had been hidden away in Beld Thylelion since The Severance. How did its existence relate to Yamina personally?

"...Very well." She watched her for a moment longer, then turned her attention to the custodian. "While she explores that, I would like to pursue my own research. Show me what you have on the Divinarch Thainnith."

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that the name seemed to catch Yamina's brief interest, though she quickly returned her focus to the book in her hands.

Quietly, the custodian led the way down the aisle. Scarlett turned to her companions. "Miss Hale and Fynn, accompany me. Miss Thornthon and Miss Astrey, stay here with Miss Ward in case of any unforeseen events."

With that, she followed the custodian, its path leading them through several turns before reaching the end of the chamber. There, a single stone shelf stood against the wall, entirely bereft of texts.

The custodian stopped before that vacant shelf, gesturing towards it.

Scarlett looked at it. "...That is empty," she said.

The custodian simply kept pointing.

"Wait, I think I know this one." Rosa moved closer to the shelf. "We're dealing with invisible books."

"I think that is unlikely," Scarlett replied, though she watched as Rosa waved a hand through the empty air. She then returned her focus to the custodian. "Is there another section in the library with materials on Thainnith? If not, is there anything related to the Seal of Thainnith or the 'Anomalous One'?"

It looked down at her for a couple of seconds, then turned to face the shelf, lifting its arm to reveal a grey, bony hand that seemed to grasp at books that weren't there. Finding nothing, it repeated the motion beside the first spot, as if searching through an unseen catalog.

"...Enough," Scarlett eventually commanded when its hand showed no signs of stopping. It turned its idle gaze back to her.

"It looks confused to me," Rosa observed, arms folded, now leaning casually against the shelf.

"Maybe someone removed the books, and it never got the news?"

Scarlett frowned deeply. Why would that be the case? And why would any texts related to this subject specifically be missing? Was there a reason it had to be the exact thing she was trying to find information on?

Maybe she could still find something relevant back where Yamina was. The Tribute of Dominion was also related to Thainnith, so it wasn't out of the realm of possibility that mentions of him or the 'Anomalous One' could be found there.

Just as she was about to head back the way they came, Fynn's voice stopped her.

“What’s that?” he asked.

Turning around, she found him gesturing towards an unusual glow emanating from a section of the empty shelf. A faint illumination, etched into the stone.

Her brows rose in slight puzzlement. Had that been there before?

Approaching for a closer look, the glow intensified slightly. She glanced over at the custodian for any signs of reaction, but it remained as impassive as ever.

Drawing near, the shining mark on the stone became clearer, resembling a sigil with a globe encased in an intricate frame. It looked somewhat familiar...

Suddenly, Amy’s breath caught, her focus narrowing on the sigil in a glare. From somewhere within, a strong urge rose up. A certainty, a conviction, that she should annihilate this. That she *could* annihilate this, along with everything around them and this gods-forsaken Isle—

“—Scarlett.”

Snapping back to reality, she realized her hand was raised in front of her, as if to destroy the sigil. Rosa stood by her side, the woman’s expression laden with worry, while Fynn observed with a frown.

A surge of raging indignation flooded through Scarlett as she recognized what had happened.

“Are you okay, Scarlett?” Rosa asked carefully.

Rather than answer directly, Scarlett posed her own question. “How long was I distracted?”

The bard paused, clearly taken aback slightly as Scarlett entirely failed to keep the anger out of her voice. “...About a minute.”

Scarlett clenched her jaw as she stared at the still-glowing sigil before her.

Something had just tried to influence her decisions, to commandeer her will, and it had nearly *succeeded*.

She also had a strong suspicion about the culprit.

Turning her head slightly, she prompted a system window to appear and display her status.

[Name: Scarlett Hartford]

[Skills:

[Superior Mana Control]

[Superior Pyromancy]

[Major Pyrokinesis]

[Greater Hydromancy]

[Major Hydrokinesis]



[Traits:

[Dignified August]

[Supercilious]

[Cavalier]

[Callous]

[Overbearing]

[Conceited]

[Third-rate Mana Veins]]

[Mana: 8532/12334]

[Points: 28]

Her eyes settled on the glitched skill that had been there ever since her visit to Crowcairn.

That feeling just now had been reminiscent of that time, but several times as invasive. It carried with it an unnatural confidence, telling her that she could do basically anything she wanted — and that included destroying that sigil and the secrets it guarded.

For some reason, the Anomalous One wanted her out of here.

She had to fight the urge to outright curse the damn thing on the spot.

“...Scarlett, talk to us, please. What’s going on?”

Looking over at Rosa, she met the woman’s concerned gaze briefly before gesturing to wait. “Allow me a moment to myself.”

She closed her eyes, inhaling deeply to center herself, warding off any rash actions and the tiny voice that called for her to burn something to the ground. When her eyes opened again, the sigil seemed to pulsate as she looked at it.

At the back of her head, she could still feel that alien urge beckoning for her to erase the sigil from existence. She dismissed it, stepping closer to scrutinize the sigil more thoroughly.

That was when she realized why it seemed familiar.

Scarlett glanced down at her left wrist, where the [Orrery of Dissonant Convergence] was. The dark iron bracelet’s origin and function remained enigmatic, as did the exact purpose of the dual pointers

on its face. At its core, it held a tiny globe nestled within a copper frame, strikingly similar to the depiction on that sigil.

Aligning the Orrery's long pointer with the sigil caused the shorter one to sweep across the bezel's circumference, stopping just shy of halfway.

Carefully, she extended her right hand towards the sigil, but nothing happened. She then tried her left, positioning the Orrery just above.

The sigil suddenly flickered out.

Before her, the stone shelf dissolved into blue light, giving way to a room bathed in a soft, ethereal glow, walls lined with ancient symbols and with various strange contraptions spread about the place.

Scarlett stared at it for several seconds.

She definitely had no memory of this from the game.