

233: Diplomatic immunity...?

A few days after her conversation with Beldon, Scarlett returned to Freybrook in the late afternoon following a day-long dungeon expedition, accompanied by the rest of her party. As they arrived, each member dispersed to deal with their own business, while Scarlett was met by Garside in the foyer en route to her office.

“My Lady,” the elderly butler said, his well-groomed mustache quivering slightly. “Young Lady Evelyne sent word that she received a response from the Rising Isle while you were gone.”

Scarlett halted at the news, turning towards him. “Where is she now?”

“In her office, my Lady. Shall I send for her?”

“No, that will not be necessary. I will go to her myself.”

With that, Scarlett ascended the stairs of the foyer and made her way to the third floor of the mansion’s western wing, where Evelyne’s office was located.

This wing housed the majority of the staff and served as the center for most of the estate’s operational needs, making it an unlikely place for the current heir of the barony to have her office.

If one had only a vague understanding of Scarlett and Evelyne’s relationship, one might misconstrue the reason for this as malice from Scarlett’s end. However, Evelyne had free rein over her choice of workspace in the mansion. The way Scarlett understood it, she simply preferred the western wing because it had ample space and the rooms were more functional, and the woman required both after having brought on a number of new people to deal with her increased workload these last months.

Although, to be fair, most of that increased workload *was* because of Scarlett. She could at least acknowledge that she hadn’t exactly made life easier for the woman since coming here. While she wasn’t sure if she was really capable of *pitying* Evelyne for that, she respected that Evelyne still faced those challenges with zeal and efficiency.

Scarlett often wondered what she would have done if she couldn’t rely on Evelyne’s support in managing the noble household and all the related businesses. If she’d been responsible for all of that, coupled with all the game-related things here, the burden placed on her would have been significantly greater, no doubt.

Case in point, she’d recently needed to make contact with representatives from the Rising Isle due to the information Beldon had given her, but she hadn’t been certain how to go about handling that. The Rising Isle could be a contentious topic among certain circles in the empire, one which she had no previous experience handling. Evelyne, however, already had connections with the Isle because of the artifacts their household had previously sold to them.

Upon reaching Evelyne’s office, Scarlett knocked just once before entering.

The office was modest in size, filled with shelves of ledgers and books on governance and law, illuminated by simple wall-mounted lights spread about. A large oak desk occupied one corner, crowded with scrolls and documents, beside which lay an assortment of quills, ink pots, and wax seals for official correspondence. A detailed map of the empire adorned the opposite wall, seeming to highlight certain key trade routes and regional specialties.

Evelyne, seated behind the desk, her dark auburn hair framing her face, looked up with a hint of surprise as Scarlett stepped inside.

“Garside told me about the response from the Rising Isle,” Scarlett stated, crossing the room.

Apparently somewhat taken aback by her presence, Evelyne nodded and set aside a document she’d been reviewing. “Yes, I was planning to discuss it with you later.”

Scarlett seated herself opposite Evelyne. “I just returned and am currently unoccupied, so I thought it best to speak with you directly.”

“Oh, well, okay... Sure.” Evelyne retrieved a striking white envelope from the desk, distinguished by the elaborate seal of an island emerging from the sea on its face. She passed it to Scarlett, who carefully opened it and began reading the contents.

“That particular reply took longer than I expected,” Evelyne explained. “I don’t think the person I’d been in contact with at the Isle before really knew what to do with your request at first. It felt like he was about to just reject it outright, but someone higher up must have been asked and gotten involved. They might have been paying more attention to you lately than I thought, Scarlett. I was even questioned by a grand wizard a few days ago regarding the purpose of your proposed visit.”

“Their curiosity is not surprising,” Scarlett offered in a measured response as she continued reading.

Basically, the letter detailed the formalities required for her to visit the Rising Isle, linked to her inquiries into Zuverian research, which was the official reason she had given. She had thought that would catch their interest, considering some of her recent achievements in the field, but she hadn’t anticipated all of this red tape.

In essence, the Rising Isle was more than willing to consent to her visit, but she would be under strict supervision by the resident mages, with significant restrictions on her movements. Apparently, the Rising Isle’s mages had also made the effort to go through the Imperial Chancellery—the empire’s central administrative body for managing diplomatic relations with other nations—to facilitate her stay.

She looked up at Evelyne. “Did the Imperial Chancellery contact you?”

“Yes, I received the last of their correspondences yesterday,” Evelyne confirmed. “Since you were away and told me to do whatever it took to get this through, I took the liberty of agreeing to their terms in your name.” A slightly concerned frown appeared on her brow. “You’ll be acting in the official capacity of an imperial envoy while you’re on the Rising Isle, so you’ll have to watch your conduct. That means it’s imperative to avoid offending any high-ranking mages.”

Scarlett gave her a long look. "...I will be as cautious as I can."

Evelyne still seemed worried. "...I'll compile a list of everything you need to know before you leave."

Scarlett allowed a small sigh to escape her, returning the letter to the desk. Things certainly had become more complicated than she'd wanted. Hopefully, this wouldn't impede her objective on the Isle. Even if it did, though, she wasn't sure there was much she could do about it.

Who would have known that the process of visiting the Rising Isle would be *this* complicated in this world? In the game, it had literally been a matter of talking with the right mage and then stepping through the Kilnstone. Now, she faced the prospect of officially representing the empire during her stay.

That was just crazy.

Did this mean that the Imperial Chancellery had expectations of what she would be *doing* on the Isle, or was this protocol simply standard for any imperial noble seeking entry?

If she were to guess, the latter was more likely. Relations between the empire and the Rising Isle were historically complicated, and that probably went double for the elites of either state. While reading up on the history of this country, Scarlett had found several mentions of defections by imperial nobles and distinguished mages from the towers and the Ustrum Assembly, with various degrees of repercussions for their families depending on the diplomatic climate at the time.

Just a few decades prior, leaving for the Isle was still considered a crime against the crown, incurring huge fines for the defector's family. She could only imagine what the consequences might have been a century or earlier when tensions had been even higher.

At least she had no plans for defecting. While she might exchange some of her information with the Isle in a way that benefited them, such actions were no longer considered treasonous by default. Besides, as an envoy, the Chancellery was probably aiming to capitalize on any advantages resulting from her visit.

The recent years had also seen several collaborations between the Rising Isle and the empire, despite their checkered past. Adalicia had even been part of one of those during the woman's research on the Zuver, and Scarlett's efforts mirrored that in some ways.

Lightly tapping her finger on the desk in thought, a vague memory floated to the forefront of Scarlett's mind. She focused on Evelyne. "You are familiar with Miss Adalicia Mendenhall, correct?"

"You mean the wizard from Elystead Tower?" Evelyne asked. "I never met her myself, but Dean Godwin mentioned that you have a good relationship with her. Why do you ask?"

"I was simply reminded of a certain matter she once inquired with me about," Scarlett said. "She wondered whether we had any familial connections to the mages on the Rising Isle. Apparently, among their council, there is a 'Grand Wizard Hartford', which puzzled me as

there should currently be no branches of our house left, particularly not on the Isle. I have already searched the heraldic register, but I find no such link. Are you familiar with this?"

Evelyne's eyebrows rose. "Hartfords on the Isle? And a grand wizard, no less? That's news to me." She seemed to ponder it for a moment. "But it's not like I'm well-versed in the Isle's politics. Still, it's unlikely we have some unknown relatives there. Do you know if they're originally from a noble family? Otherwise, it could simply be someone who adopted the name sometime in the past. I've heard the mages on the Rising Isle often don't care for our customs."

"I am unsure," Scarlett replied. "I suppose that is a possibility."

Evelyne looked in thought for a short while. "Did father never mention anything about it? I know he visited the Isle in the past, so he would definitely have known about this."

Scarlett paused for a moment, a stir of discomfort rising slowly inside at the mention of the late Baron Hartford, but she dismissed it with a shake of her head. "I have no memory of him discussing such matters with me."

Even if he had, she wouldn't know about it. The man had died years before she arrived in this world.

"Then it seems we're both in the dark," Evelyne said. "Perhaps you can learn more about it once you're there. But please, don't get into a fight with whoever that grand wizard is. Our tiny barony's influence isn't even close to reaching the Rising Isle, and it would be a disaster if we somehow worsened the relationship between them and the empire."

"I am not so careless as to provoke anyone simply because they annoy me."

Or, well, at least she tried not to be most of the time. She knew that pissing off the Rising Isle was a bad idea. There was a reason they'd stuck around for centuries, despite the empire literally having several thousand times the population and landmass.

Evelyne's expression held some skepticism in it, but eventually, the woman seemed to accept her words, picking up the white letter from the desk. "Alright. I suppose I don't have much choice other than to trust your judgement."

"You do have a choice," Scarlett said. "I have simply shown that trusting me is the better option."

Stopping, Evelyne's eyes lingered on Scarlett for a few seconds. "... Yeah, I guess you're right." She cleared her throat, leaning back in her seat. "Anyhow, they're expecting you on the Rising Isle in two days. Do you think you'll be prepared by then?"

"That will not be an issue."

"Good. If there's anything else you need, you can just let me know."

"I will."

After their conversation, Scarlett took her leave and made her way back to her own office at the opposite end of the mansion. Once there, she discovered a neatly organized pile of reports waiting on her desk, presumably courtesy of Evelyne. Among them lay an envelope, which Scarlett promptly picked up and opened as she settled into her chair.

Her eyes moved to the name of the sender.

‘Emeritus Master Docent Grand Wizard Adalicia Mendenhall’.

How timely.

I hope this letter finds you well, Baroness Hartford.

I received your latest message, and I wish you luck if you truly intend to visit the Rising Isle. I imagine the culture and people there can be different and somewhat grating to a noble, but I am sure you will navigate it just fine. If anything, the mages and wizards there are even more obsessed with their research and the Zuver than us here in the empire, so there will undoubtedly be numerous people who are more than willing to speak and facilitate your needs there if the purpose behind your visit is related to that.

Regarding your request, I took the liberty of contacting one of the individuals whom I collaborated with during my last visit to the Isle. His name is Magister Penney, and he is a rather skilled grand wizard whose personality I personally found quite amiable. He agreed to act as your unofficial liaison during your stay, so I recommend seeking him out when you can. Hopefully, his assistance can prove a valuable resource.

I would not object to hearing more about this visit of yours when we next meet. After my previous experiences with you, I find myself rather intrigued regarding what might pique the interest of someone like you on the Isle, Baroness.

As a last remark, I ask that should the Dean seek your hospitality again in the near future, please do not encourage the shirking of his duties any more than necessary. It is challenging enough as it is to keep him here in the empire, and now he appears to have developed a newfound interest in that mansion of yours. ‘Vexing’ hardly begins to describe the difficulties of dealing with that man.

*Best regards,
Adalicia Mendenhall.*

As Scarlett finished the letter, she set it aside and settled back in her seat. It seemed as if her connection with Adalicia at least made her upcoming trip slightly easier. Good thing she’d contacted the woman before leaving.

Her gaze absently drifted to the ceiling as she contemplated this upcoming journey of hers.

It would mark the first time she actually visited the Rising Isle in person, and she had to admit that she felt a mix of curiosity and anticipation at that fact. The Isle’s representation in the game had always been captivating in its own right, and it would be interesting to see how that looked in this world. Beyond the primary motive behind her visit there, the Isle also promised a wealth of interesting locations.

Not that she knew how many of them she would get the opportunity to see. She needed to complete the quest given by Arlene, and that took priority over everything else. At the moment, that involved uncovering the fate of the woman's brother, who had seemingly vanished centuries ago.

According to Beldon, there were scant references to him in any of the records his agents had uncovered. There were *some* mentions of a mage fitting the description of Arlene's brother, and those had spoken of him in relation to the Rising Isle of the time. Yet, the details ended there, and Beldon had suggested that a direct investigation was the only viable option for learning more.

Unfortunately for both him and Scarlett, Mirage's presence on the Rising Isle was incredibly limited. The Isle used to be notoriously isolationist and protective of its knowledge and artifacts, and that still remained true to a certain extent today. They still had a lot of measures in place to prevent groups like Mirage or the Hallowed Cabal from infiltrating their ranks and stealing their secrets. Consequently, even seemingly innocuous information was inaccessible to outsiders.

That's why Scarlett's best bet was to simply go there herself and find what she needed. Her reputation regarding Zuverian research was enough to at least get her access to the Isle, and from there, she could hopefully leverage her game knowledge to uncover more of what she wanted to know. And if she was lucky, she might even be able to convince them to visit some places that she usually wouldn't be allowed in.

And, well, from there, who knows? She'd simply have to wait and see.