

237: Hearty introductions

The accommodations provided to Scarlett and her party were pretty decent, as far as lodgings went. They weren't really comparable to her mansion back in Freybrook, but while the Rising Isle boasted plenty of impressive landmarks, it seemed their appreciation for stunning architecture didn't quite extend as far when it came to interior design.

Shortly after Bunce had introduced them to where they'd be staying, food had also been delivered to their rooms. Around the same time, however, Magister Penney also arrived to greet Scarlett, so she ended up leaving her companions to dine alone as she met with him.

That was why the two of them found themselves sitting opposite each other in one of the adjacent rooms, the space illuminated by a single chandelier.

Magister Penney didn't quite fit the stereotypical wizard's image. Appearing to be somewhere in his fifties, his head and face were completely bald, and he had a more robust and plump build, filling out the armchair he occupied. Unlike Grand Wizard Hartford's stern presence or Principal Wizard Bunce's friendlier demeanor, Magister Penney wore a warm, chummy smile on his face.

"Master Docent Mendenhall has spoken highly of you, Baroness," he began with a sincere tone. "Moreover, your recent discoveries have sparked quite the number of discussions here on the Isle. Meeting the woman behind the rumors is indeed a pleasure for me. If even a fraction of them hold true, you are an exceptionally talented individual."

"I can only hope you live up to those expectations," Scarlett replied. "Miss Mendenhall has also spoken well of you, Magister. It is a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance."

He dismissed the formality with a wave and a hearty laugh. "Please, don't stand on ceremony with me. Any friend of a friend is a friend of mine, as they say. Just call me Hugbert!"

Scarlett arched an eyebrow. That name was rather...apt. She wondered if it ever elicited any comments?

The man then shifted the conversation. "Now, I've been informed that the council will convene in the morning to discuss a special request of yours. You're seeking access to the Astral Sanctum, as I understand it?"

"That is correct," Scarlett said.

'Hugbert' cleared his throat. "Well, as you are likely aware, I also happen to be a member of said council, and I'm more than willing to support your request. However, before doing so openly, I would like to understand a bit more about what you expect to find in the Sanctum and your intentions there."

Scarlett observed him thoughtfully for a moment before responding. "...I suppose I can share some more details. I have already briefed Grand Wizard Hartford, but my recent findings from the Zuverian ruins east of Faybarrow indicate the existence of unexplored sections within the Astral Sanctum."

“And what makes you so certain of that? Any records you might have found there would predate our presence here, so isn’t it perfectly reasonable that we would already have found these sections you are talking about?”

“If you had, you would not need me to provide you any further details.” Scarlett gave him a skeptical look. “You do not strike me as the type who would attempt to test me in that way.”

The man chuckled. “No, I suppose I’m not. Then, assuming you’re right about these hitherto ‘unearthed’ sections, what could we expect to find in them?”

“I believe you might be better poised to answer that question than me,” Scarlett said. “I am merely offering my assistance in revealing them.”

The magister scratched his chin ponderously. “If it is within the Astral Sanctum, we’re likely dealing with something related to the protective and warding barriers surrounding the Isle. Some of their functions remain unknown to us even to this day, so any new insights we might glean on that end could certainly prove valuable.”

“And how valuable, exactly, would you say?” Scarlett asked.

“That’s a matter for the council to discuss tomorrow,” he replied. “Do you have any particular thoughts on the matter?”

Scarlett shook her head. “I would first prefer to hear their stance before suggesting anything. It would not be appropriate to assert any demands before the council has even assessed my credibility.”

“Ah, playing your cards close to your chest, I see! Hehe, understandable, understandable. I certainly can’t fault you for that, given how hawkish some of my fellow council members can be.”

“Is that so?”

Scarlett was surprised that he didn’t mind admitting as much to her.

“Yes, but do avoid telling them I said so, if you’d be so kind,” Hugbert added in a light tone. Chuckling once more, he adjusted his position in his seat. “But I’ll say — it excites me thinking about what we might discover with this reveal of yours. Master Docent Mendenhall mentioned that interactions with you often leave one’s initial expectations baffled, and I don’t know her to be a woman who overstates such things.”

“Hopefully we will find if that holds true tomorrow.”

“Indeed, we will! And I’ll do what I can to persuade the others to give you the opportunity to substantiate your claims. However, I must warn you to be prepared for resistance from those of us wary of granting an outsider access to the Isle’s secrets. Even if your request is approved, I’m sure you understand that you’ll be placed under some stringent conditions to ensure nothing untoward happens for either party.”

“I had anticipated as much,” Scarlett said. She would be visiting the heart of much of the Rising Isle’s defensive measures, after all. “Regarding Grand Wizard Hartford, do you believe he might be among those who oppose my proposal?”

Hugbert appeared thoughtful. “That’s hard to say,” he mused. “Gaspar’s reactions can be...unpredictable. It might depend on how your meeting with him proceeded. I assume it went well? His decision to escalate your request to the council so quickly was unexpected in its own way.”

Scarlett’s lips thinned into a line. “Our interaction was relatively brief, and I cannot discern his stance simply from that. I think he has a certain...indifference towards me.”

The magister responded with a light laugh. “That is often the impression he leaves upon first meeting.”

Scarlett studied him for a moment. “It is curious that you do not question whether he and I had any prior acquaintance. Others have seemingly assumed we were related.”

“I am familiar enough with Gaspar’s background to know he has little connection outside the Rising Isle,” Hugbert said. “His family has been influential here for generations, contributing some rather noteworthy names to our numbers now and then and producing a significant number of distinguished wizards, if I recall correctly. In a way, the Hartfords represent what you might consider the closest thing we have to a noble lineage on the Isle.”

“My impression was that the Rising Isle rejected all forms of traditional hierarchy and classicism,” Scarlett replied. “Grand Wizard Hartford seemed particularly dismissive of such conventions. Yet you are telling me that he holds a similar status here?”

Hugbert showed her a smile. “No, I’d say it is rather more nuanced than that. My comparison was only meant to give a concept more relatable to you. Gaspar himself has achieved more than enough personal achievements to deserve his current position, and his name would not have helped him achieve that. Rather, the Hartford name simply happens to be one of the more reputable ones on the Isle, since it is uncommon for lineages to stay over several generations. This is likely why your name might elicit a reaction from those who hear it here.”

“Indeed?” So the Hartfords of the Rising Isle could actually be said to hold *more* esteem on the Isle than those in the empire. That revelation was somewhat irritating. “It is surprising that this is not more well-known in the empire,” she remarked. “I myself was oblivious to the existence of Hartfords here until recently.”

“You were?” Hugbert blinked, then paused reflectively. “Hmm, other than a select few of our numbers, we wizards rarely have reason to interact with nobles in the empire, so it is not entirely surprising that details of certain families here don’t reach the mainland. We have always maintained a level of detachment from the more secular affairs, even more so with the empire.”

Scarlett remained quiet, considering his words.

Given that the Hartford barony was relatively minor, located near the empire's western border, and was only really recognized for its early inclusion in the Elysian Proclamation, it made sense that the connection between the name in the empire and the Rising Isle was somewhat overlooked. The magister was likely correct in that the overlap of those who interacted both with minor imperial nobles and the Isle's wizards was small.

However, if she were to guess, people like the previous Baron Hartford and Grand Wizard Hartford himself would almost definitely have been aware of it.

Her attention stayed on Hugbert's large frame for a few seconds. "Earlier, you mentioned that the Hartford family has contributed two arch wizards to the Rising Isle in its time. When did this occur, and how long have they been established on the Isle?"

The man's forehead knit together slightly at the questions. "Oh, those are harder for me to answer. I know that Arch Wizard Malenka, who lived about a century ago, was a Hartford, and there was another before her. If you'd like to know more than that, I'd suggest speaking directly with Gaspar."

"I suspect he might not be so forthcoming with such information," Scarlett said.

"Then I'm afraid I can offer little more assistance. An outsider accessing our archival records would also require council permission, which, ironically, might be harder to obtain than with your main request. There are several council members who would frown upon a noble investigating the lineages of one of their own."

"That is unfortunate." Scarlett was genuinely disappointed at that. "I doubt it is a coincidence that our families share a name, yet there is no indication in my family's records that we have ever established a branch on the Isle."

"Well, that is hardly surprising," the magister said.

"No? And why is that?"

"I do know that the Hartfords have been around since before the relations between the Isle and the empire improved. If they began as a branch of your house, then its founder would likely have committed treason in joining the Rising Isle. Depending on the time, such actions could no doubt have led to their erasure from both familial and heraldic records, don't you think?"

Scarlett stared at him for a moment.

That...made sense. In fact, she felt stupid for not having considered the possibility herself. She already knew that the empire had historically punished mages who defected to the Isle, and while she hadn't read any examples of erasing their existence from official records, that was the point.

This basically confirmed that Gaspar probably *did* hail from a very distant branch of her house. If his family had still been imperial nobles, they would probably have adopted a new name generations ago, but maybe that wasn't how it was done on the Isle.

Her expression turned contemplative.

Actually, this knowledge might also explain another mystery she had been exploring.

She looked back at Magister Penney. “On a related note, I am currently investigating the story of a certain mage from the empire who might have migrated to the Isle roughly three centuries ago. The records of him in the empire are scarce, but I know that he was a noble, so his story might parallel the Hartfords.”

“That’s a plausible scenario. Do you have a name?”

“Only a first name: Delmont.”

“Delmont?” the man echoed, then shook his head. “Unfortunately, that doesn’t tell me much. It’s a rather common name here.”

“I was afraid of that.” Scarlett crossed her arms, thinking about how she best could proceed in looking into this matter. “While I understand the council’s reservations about me delving into Grand Wizard Hartford’s family history, this inquiry does not concern any particular contemporary figure. Do you think they might grant me permission to consult your records for this case specifically? It is of rather significant personal interest to me.”

The magister appeared pensive. “I can certainly raise the topic during our meeting tomorrow. While I can’t predict the council’s decision, if you show results with your other request, I imagine that could form room for a broader negotiation surrounding it.”

“That would indeed be preferable,” Scarlett said. She then decided to shift the subject once more. “There is one more thing I was interested in asking you.”

“Oh?” The man’s expression turned curious. “And what might that be?”

“Earlier today, I encountered a rather fascinating individual in the Arcanum Spire. I was wondering if you might know who they were.”

“Fascinating, you say?” Hugbert chuckled with interest. “That must mean they made quite the impression. Who might this person be?”

“She introduced herself as Senior Wizard Yamina.”

“Yamina, you say...?” A crease formed on his forehead as he seemed to ponder the name. “And a Senior Wizard...?”

“That is what she claimed, yes. Is there a problem?” Scarlett asked, studying his reaction.

“No, not at all,” the man reassured her in a lively voice. “The name does ring a bell, but I must admit I’m not especially familiar with this individual. A good sixth of the Isle’s mages are Senior Wizards, which makes it somewhat of a challenge to know each one personally. Mind you, I do try my best,” he added with a wink.

Scarlett regarded him for a few seconds, taking in his response. “I see,” she concluded after a pause. “Chances are slim that our paths will cross again, so perhaps it does not matter whether I know more about them or not. But thank you for addressing my inquiries and for promising your support at tomorrow’s council session.”

“Would you say this means all the serious business matters have been discussed?” Hugbert asked.

Scarlett nodded. “Yes, that should cover everything for now.”

His smile broadened, and he patted his stomach passionately. “Marvelous! Then, what say you of joining me for a meal? It is always a joy to exchange stories with a newfound friend, and I can regale you with the tale of the time I found myself nose-to-nose with a Coral Colossus on one of my research exploits!”