

## 78: A wizard's prospects

A woman sat by her lonesome behind an ornate, black wooden desk, peering down at an array of thick, text-laden papers. Bookshelves lined the room, lit up by several magical candles hanging by bronze chains from the ceiling. Clothed in a long, white dress that went to her feet, the woman had sharp features and tanned skin, along with smooth black hair that reached down to her lower back. A focused look was drawn upon her face as she jotted notes on the papers beside her, occasionally referencing some of the other texts.

A knock sounded out from the door. "Master Docent? Are you preoccupied?"

Adalicia Mendenhall looked up from her work, a slight frown on her brow. "I was, until just a moment ago," she answered. "And I would have liked to be for a while longer, but it's too late now. Was there something you wanted?"

"I'm sorry, Master Docent. I was asked to go to you," the voice from the other side of the door said.

Adalicia sat up in her seat and placed her pen down. "It's alright. Come in," she said as she moved some hair over her shoulder.

The door opened, and a short man with glasses entered. His robes were of a clear blue, with hints of gold lining the edges.

Adalicia eyed him. If she was remembering correctly, he was Proctor Mage Fiske. One of the younger mages that had joined on the expedition, and not someone she would have expected to come to get her like this. "What was this about?" she asked.

"Master Docent Berkeley sent me. He said there was an important letter sent to you from the mainland."

"...Could you not have reported this to me via message?"

He shook his head. "We tried. But there was no response."

Adalicia looked down at the desk, towards the heavy, leather-bound tome that was placed in the corner. The gold tracery on the cover depicted a radiant circle with several spears through it. She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Of course. I'm sorry."

She had blocked all incoming magics so that she wouldn't get distracted during her experimenting earlier, but she'd forgotten to disable the crest when she was finished. Leaning over and opening the tome, she turned to a certain page where a glowing sigil was engraved on the valuable paper. Moving her hand over the crest to dismiss the effect, the glow faded away.

She looked up at Fiske. "What was the letter about?"

He seemed to hesitate for a moment. "I'm not sure, Master Docent. I was only told that it was important."

Adalicia creased her brows. That was odd. It was unlikely to be directly to her if that was the case. But if something were to have happened in the empire again so soon after the last event... The thought created an unpleasant taste in her mouth.

She rose from her chair. Her work was mostly finished for the day, and it was best to check something like this in person. "I'll see with Master Docent Berkeley myself then. Thank you for informing me, Proctor Fiske."

The man straightened his back a little. "O-Of course."

Adalicia circled the desk and started walking towards the exit. "If you want," she said, pausing where he stood. "You can go over the reports on my desk while I am away. They're the current status of the collaborative efforts between me, Master Docent Ainsworth, and Grand Wizard Hartford."

His eyes went wide. "I-Is that okay?" he asked, the interest clear in his tone.

Understandable enough. It wasn't often that mages from the most esteemed of the mage towers, the Ustrum Assembly, and the Rising Isle worked together on a project like this. Especially when one of them was an Arch Wizard like Ainsworth. But this was quite the unique project, after all. The paper on it would no doubt shake much of academia when it was completed.

"Of course. It's an open collaboration." Despite the Assembly's—and certain members of the Elystead Tower—best efforts for the opposite. "Just make sure not to jumble any of my papers," she said with a small smile.

"I swear I won't!"

"Good. Then I'll be back later."

She left the room, exiting into the intricate hallway outside. The grand, arched windows lent a glorious view of the waterways outside, and the multitude of structures built on it. Each tracing back further into history than any of the mage towers in the empire. Walking down the hallway, Adalicia couldn't stop herself from marveling at the sights as the daylight glittered across the small waterfalls and weirs that connected the different levels of the city.

The architecture of the Rising Isle never ceased to astound her. So reminiscent of the Mausoleum and other buildings in the Ascendant Court, yet so fresh and unique all the same. Instead of simply copying and reusing some of the ancient Zuverian structures like all others had, the mages here had succeeded in restoring and improving what already was. It brought to mind the dreams she'd had as a child — of joining the Isle and becoming a mage like no other.

Things hadn't quite played out as she had dreamed, but she was here nonetheless. She had her regrets, but the Elystead Tower was impressive in its own right. And things were what they were.

Leaving the residence and office halls that had been provided for those in their expedition, Adalicia walked through the stately foreign dignitary quarter of the Rising Isle, passing by

several mages on her way. Many were visitors, but more called this place their home. Those were the ones that afforded this place the proud reputation it held as a holy land for all mages.

Still, one could walk across most of the Isle in under an hour, and it could not compare to the populations of even some of the smaller cities in the empire. But that did not make it any less of a power on the international level.

Soon enough, Adalicia reached the Chamber of Conjunction, where much of the traffic moved through. The large, spherical building almost dwarfed the Ustrum Assembly, and was the only place on the entire Isle where magic from the outside could pass through, as well as where its Kilnstones were located.

Finding one of the resident mages working here, she had them guide her through the large floor of the structure to the large office that had been afforded to their expedition for their stay here. Inside waited two of the Proctor Mages that had joined the expedition, and one Adjunct Mage, as well as Grand Docent Berkeley, who sat behind a large stone desk at the back of the room. Several books and large stacks of papers were neatly ordered in front of him.

The man looked up as she approached, what remained of his greying hair swaying as he did. He pushed a book to the side.

“Hmph. You sure took your time, Adalicia,” he grunted, screwing up his mouth as he righted his glasses with his finger. “I sent the boy ages ago.”

“Not more than twenty minutes have passed since he came to me, Kinnard.” She pulled up a white chair, pressing down her dress as she sat opposite him. “Why don’t you stop being a grouch and tell me what this letter was about?”

“A grouch? A grouch!?” The man’s disgruntled stare met her eyes. “You young people have it easy these days! Exalted opportunities—as if handed down by Ittar himself!—seem to fall down on your laps if you so *breathe* correctly, yet none of you ever show any respect. Hmph.”

Adalicia restrained from rolling her eyes. Kinnard considered anyone under sixty ‘young people’. And despite his age, he had yet to understand that his own behavior was what prompted this apparent disrespect towards him.

Still, his words did make her curious. “What do you mean by exalted opportunities?”

Judging from how calm they were here, it didn’t appear to be bad news as she’d feared.

Kinnard picked up a piece of paper from his desk and handed it over to her. His overly neat handwriting dotted its face. “There you have it. Apparently that person has been trying to contact you for a while, but no one bothered forwarding it here,” he said. “This message was supposed to be sent to you directly, but I doubt it’ll stay quiet for long. Those fools at relations don’t know how to shut their mouths.”

Adalicia’s eyes glossed over the text.

*Greetings, Emeritus Master Docent Grand Wizard Mendenhall.*

*My name is Evelyne Hartford. I am contacting you on my sister's behalf, Baroness Scarlett Hartford. As you might be aware, our family recently uncovered a set of undiscovered Zuverian ruins outside of Freybrook, and has for the past month been in talks with the Elystead Tower regarding the management and transfer of ownership of some of the findings.*

Adalicia's eyebrows rose. Hartford? Was there a noble family with that name in the empire? Were they related to Grand Wizard Hartford here on the Rising Isle? As far as she was aware, he had no ties to nobility. But matters of the aristocracy were far from her expertise.

Now that she thought about it, she *did* recall another—somewhat prominent mage—with the same name. While she had never met him herself, the Vice-dean had been acquainted with the man. Him being a noble would have made sense.

Of course, she had heard about the recently uncovered ruins as well. There had been much talk about it between the mages here on the Isle after it was announced, though Adalicia had later heard that there hadn't appeared to be anything of note amongst what was discovered. She had assumed the towers and the Assembly would still bicker over the findings, but the Isle mages already had more than enough Zuverian relics to care about smaller discoveries like this.

She continued reading.

*My sister has expressed the desire to meet with you—as an individual, not a mage of Elystead Tower—regarding matters related to our recent discovery, as well as subjects that are more private. I have been informed you are currently in the middle of an exchange expedition to the Rising Isle, and I do not know when this message will reach you. This is not the first time I have tried to contact you, but I do hope it will be the last.*

*To this end, I have conferred with my sister — who wished to inform you that the revelation of the Zuverian ruins near Freybrook was no fluke, and that there remains much to explore. She is willing to negotiate the future application of her research with you in person, in the hopes that it might help both parties to achieve goals that may be considered beneficial to them.*

*If you were to be interested in further talks on the subject, my sister has invited you to visit her at our family's mansion in Freybrook, where you will be greeted as a welcome guest at the nearest time that suits you.*

*Cordially,*

*Evelyne Hartford, in lieu of Baroness Scarlett Hartford, lady of Stagmond Keep.*

Adalicia spent several seconds staring at the letter. She didn't quite get the point behind this. Assuming this baroness was telling the truth—and did in fact have research that spoke of the location of more Zuverian ruins—why would she contact her specifically? The two of them had no prior relationship, and the number of people who would have an interest in this was massive. Adalicia knew nothing in particular about herself that would attract a noble of the empire.

Still, the proposal itself was definitely appealing. While there were some Zuverian artifacts that did not hold much research value to the community at large anymore, the ones that did mean that each Zuverian ruin was still a potential treasure trove in the waiting. She could definitely understand Kinnard's envy, and why the tower would hold an interest. If it meant forging good relations with this noblewoman, they would probably want her to accept this offer before she started looking towards any of the other mage towers.

Adalicia looked up at Kinnard. "Were there any letters other than this?"

He shook his head. "The probably didn't bother saving any of the ones before this one caught their attention. That bunch is as lazy as they come."

She glanced down at the paper again. It was true that certain sections of the tower had grown more closed and complacent over the last few years, ever since the Dean began spending less attention to matters and disappearing more frequently. But it wasn't something she could change.

She was curious about whatever it was this noblewoman knew, at least. But her current work took priority, and while they were nearing the end of what they could achieve here practically, there were at minimum a few weeks left before she could leave for anything major. And travel through the Kilnstone back and forth to a city like Freybrook couldn't be done on such a short measure.

Adalicia held her hand up to her chin. There were other ways, however. A certain Arch Wizard, for example, owed her a favor or two.