

146: First moves

Scarlett stayed with Lord and Lady Withersworth for a while, taking part in the conversations with the group of gentlemen as best as she could. Lady Withersworth wasn't subtle with her intentions of helping Scarlett create connections during the talks, but none of the men seemed to mind. They even seemed pleased with the opportunity, for some reason. She wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth, however, nor did she intend to waste Lady Withersworth's efforts. Exactly *why* the woman was so focused on supporting her like this was still a bit unclear, but it clearly wasn't a bad thing.

Eventually, after having become more familiar with Lord Withersworth's 'friends'—Dean Godwin had acted naturally with her the whole time—and promising to introduce some of them to her sister who was in charge of most of the Hartfords' businesses, the band playing music in the chamber's corner quieted down as a soft ring sounded out through the space. People's attention turned in the direction of the main ballroom.

"It appears Duke Tyndall intends to give his address," Lady Withersworth said. She looked at the group—barring Scarlett—consisting almost entirely of elder men. "This is where we will have to say our goodbyes. You have had free reins over my husband for long enough. It will do him good to spend some time with his family as well."

"We wouldn't dare to keep him for any longer than we already have," one of the men, Arthur Windermere, replied. "Nor want to," he added with a chuckle, earning a glare from the man in question. He then turned to Scarlett. "Baroness, it has been a pleasure. Next time the Western Merchant's Alliance has business in Freybrook, I will make sure that they look into any potential prospects there are with your barony."

She gently lowered her head. "The sentiment is mutual."

Evelyne would love it when she heard that, though Scarlett herself wasn't *quite* sure where the man's enthusiasm came from. While she had managed to make conversation with these men, she didn't think it was quite on the level where they would be running to deepen their connections with her like this, despite Lady Withersworth's efforts. The woman must have a lot more pull with her husband's friends than one would think.

The other men shared similar words with Scarlett, with Godwin being the last to speak. He studied her for a moment. "I hope we will meet again soon, Baroness."

"I am certain that we will," she said.

If he wanted to, there probably wasn't much keeping him from just visiting her whenever he wanted. She was familiar enough with his personality to know that he wasn't one to shy away from leaving his subordinates at Elystead Tower to do his work for him whenever he busied himself with other things.

After saying the last goodbyes, Scarlett accompanied Lady Withersworth and her husband as they returned to the ballroom. A lot of people were streaming into the large chamber from the various connecting side rooms, and the dance floor had been replaced by a stage that had banderols of dark green velvet running along its sides and a podium at its center.

She spotted Evelyne among the crowd, standing near a gathering of tables that looked oddly untouched, though that might just be because the servants were quick to replace any refreshments and tidy up after guests as they moved about. Standing next to the woman was Livvi and, to Scarlett's surprise, Raimond Abram. The young deacon belonging to the Followers of Ittar was dressed in a bright red overcoat that reached his ankles, with his blond hair hanging down in a ponytail as he smiled brightly at his two conversational partners.

"My husband and I will try to find wherever it was that our children went to," Lady Withersworth said beside Scarlett. "You are, of course free to come with us, if you wish."

She shook her head in reply, gesturing towards Evelyne. "I should first go and meet up with my sister."

The older woman looked in that direction. "The young woman standing next to Knottley's daughter, I presume?"

"That is correct."

Lady Withersworth smiled. "I see. It is always good to keep with family. You will have to introduce us later."

Scarlett nodded. "I will do so when afforded the opportunity."

"Then I wish you the best of luck for now. I am sure we will see each other again later." The woman nudged the arm of her husband, who looked like he hadn't really been paying attention as he had picked up a sweet from a passing servant. "Dear, are you not going to say goodbye to the Baroness?"

He blinked, his brows furrowing as he turned to look at Scarlett. "Hmph. Since my wife has said so, I suppose we will see each other again, Baroness. I am sure you can survive on your own until then."

His wife gave an apologetic look with a smile. "The skies are likely to fall before my husband learns how to be polite, but don't mind him."

"I am quite experienced in dealing with such people by now, so there is no need to worry," Scarlett said.

That earned a small laugh from Lady Withersworth and a grumble from her husband.

With one last goodbye, the couple left to find the rest of their family and Scarlett began moving towards Evelyne. The auburn-haired woman noticed her soon enough, and both Raimond and Livvi's eyes turned in her direction.

"Scarlett," Evelyne said when she reached them. "Have things gone well? I haven't seen you for a while, but Livvi said that you were with Lady Withersworth earlier."

"There have been no problems," she replied. "I met and spoke with some of the Withersworths' acquaintances, including the dean of the Elystead Tower and some other influential figures. I will inform you of the details at a later time."

Evelyne looked surprised at that, but Scarlett turned her attention to Livvi and Raimond, focusing on the latter. “I was not expecting to encounter you here tonight, Mister Abraham. Are you familiar with my sister from before?”

The man’s smile shined even brighter at her. “Ah, Baroness. Always a pleasure, to be sure. As a wandering priest, I just so happened to be extended an invitation to this fine evening’s event through a dear friend of mine. I thought it unfair of me *not* to grace these magnificent halls with my presence and perhaps provide insight into Ittar’s will to a weary soul or two if needed. Of course, it would be a crime not to also partake in the glorious accommodations and refreshments provided as well.” He held up a wineglass in his right hand, tipping it towards Livvi. “As I was administering my homilies to some eagerly amenable subjects, I just so happened to spot a familiar face speaking with your sister here and thought it would be a prime opportunity for a light social rendezvous with an old acquaintance and to make a new friend. I did not know that our fine lovely Evelyne here was the Baroness’ younger sister until she introduced herself, but it was a pleasant surprise.”

A small blush played across Evelyne’s face, and Livvi held the expression of someone already well-accustomed to the man’s rather excessive personality. Scarlett wasn’t quite sure what they might have been discussing, but she could imagine how most longer conversations with Raimond might play out. Especially when he was acting as ‘Ray Abraham’ in his traveling priest guise.

For a moment, she studied his face for any sign that he hadn’t just found Evelyne out of ‘pure coincidence’. That was like trying to tell when Rosa was being serious or not, though. He didn’t seem to be lying, nor was he acting any different from the last time she had met him. Besides, if he really suspected Scarlett of something, this wasn’t the way he would go about things. It was unlikely that he knew anything about her involvement in the heist on the Sanctuary of Ittar, which meant he probably still wanted to have a good relationship with her because of what information she might have on more holy artifacts.

The four of them held some brief discussions as more and more people flowed into the ballroom. Eventually, the noise around them quieted down as all of the guests’ attention turned toward the stage at the center. Scarlett looked in that direction to see a tall man with dark, slicked-back hair and a harsh exterior that had walked up to the podium. He looked out over the gathered masses with a piercing gaze.

Duke Santon Tyndall. The host of tonight’s event.

“Esteemed guests. I welcome all of you to my home.” The man spoke, and the words echoed out across the ballroom. The last of the attendees fell silent. “It is a peculiar thought, but I often forget that this has become a yearly tradition now, tracing back to the days of my father. He had the idea of gathering the empire’s most notable and finest individuals to celebrate the bonds that tie us together as servants of this glorious nation, yet I do not think he ever envisioned what we have here today. I dare say there is no other event like it. I see before me the pillars of the empire; an assembly of talent and authority unmatched in the world.”

He went quiet for a moment.

“I often take this opportunity to address you all as equals, reminding you of our duties and bringing to attention important matters that I feel are overlooked or neglected, but this year I

will keep it short.” His expression turned even firmer as he looked out over the faces before him. “While some of us may differ in our opinions and ideals, we must remember that our loyalty lies first and foremost with His Majesty and his realm. We must remain steadfast in our duty to maintain order and justice in our lands, especially now that it appears trying times are once more upon us. Let us not forget that those of us who hold power and privilege also bear great responsibility. So let us revel in this evening’s festivities — let us take this night to relax after a fruitful year, in wait for the challenges that face us. But do so with the dignity and decorum that befits our station. May tonight be a testament to our unity and resolve. Thank you.”

A chorus of applause filled the room. The Duke left the stage not long after and people started moving around again. The music wended up once more, though it seemed more suited for casual conversation now than dancing.

“The recent events seem to have affected the Duke more than one might have expected,” Evelyne noted.

“I was expecting more as well,” Livvi said. “His lands have been some of the least affected lately. Even after the Dragon Rampage ravaged his southern borders, I don’t remember him acting this laconic.”

“An attack by an ancient dragon could be likened to a natural disaster.” Raimond shook his head lightly. “It is a tragedy, but often also a one-time event. It does not bring about as much uncertainty about the future as this year’s happenings have.”

Scarlett eyed him. She wondered what he would say if he knew the Dragon Rampage had been precipitated by the Cabal. It probably wouldn’t even occur to most people, considering how powerful even younger dragons were in this world.

“You think he is that worried about the Tribe of Sin’s attacks?” Livvi asked.

“Perhaps.” For a moment, the man looked in the direction of the Duke with a solemn disposition. “Or perhaps he has heard about things we have not.”

Evelyne held a hint of worry on her face. “Like what?”

A second passed, then the serious air around Raimond disappeared and he turned to the woman with a smile once more. “What indeed? I am hardly the most knowledgeable about what important matters are taking place across the empire, so I am afraid I cannot tell you much. But I’m sure that those that must know do, and they are doing what they can to protect us all.”

He gestured at Scarlett. “In fact, I happen to have heard that the fiancé of the Baroness here, Sir Leon, recently partook in a cooperative operation with some of the mage towers, the Shields Guild, and the Followers of Ittar against the Tribe of Sin. His accomplishments were rather notable. A hero of the empire in the making, it would appear.”

Scarlett knitted her forehead. She had heard no specifics related to it, but she supposed that was related to whatever mission Leon had gone on after helping her in Autumnwell. The question was if he was still busy or if he was here tonight.

“That is more than I knew,” Livvi said. “I was actually involved in managing some of the logistics on the Guild’s end, though I haven’t been told much of the results yet. I heard the estimations are that the Tribe suffered big losses, however.”

Raimond nodded his head. “Large losses of life are always tragic, but in this particular case I will admit to some relief at the news. If Ittar allows, it will hopefully help to prevent even more bloodshed in the future. I—”

“If it isn’t Baroness Scarlett Hartford,” a harsh voice interrupted him, carrying over even the dozen or so conversations near them.

Their group turned to look at a portly middle-aged man with rosy cheeks standing among a group of men and women not too far away from them. He wore an elaborate set of clothes that looked ever-so-slightly too tight for his frame but also made him stand out more among some of the other guests. From the way his company’s heads were turned in Scarlett’s direction, it would almost seem like the man had been in the middle of a discussion with them when he had coincidentally noticed her and called out her name.

She doubted that was really what happened. After all, she recognized this man.

This was Count Tizian Soames. She had never spoken with him directly, but she had paid enough attention during his appearance at the Elysian Proclamation to make a note of his face and general appearance. It only made sense to do so, considering this man was a servant of the being that lurked inside Rosa. Not to mention he was the bargaining chip Scarlett had used to make a deal with that being.

The man made as if to excuse himself from his group before he started walking over towards Scarlett. The other guests strode out of his way as he did.

“Never would I have expected to see you here tonight, Baroness. On account of what happened during your last...” He coughed into his hand. “...*public showing*, I would have expected you to take some time for yourself before appearing again. I realize now that was rather presumptuous of me, so I offer my apologies.”

He didn’t even try to hide the derisive look on his face.

Scarlett scowled.

What the *hell* was he up to?

Some whispers sprang up around them, and most of the nearby people had paused in their conversations.

“You must have been quite excited to attend tonight if you still took time out of your busy schedule to be there. I can only imagine what other important matters someone as *esteemed*—” The word was spoken in a snide way—“as you must have forsaken for this.”

Her scowl deepened, and the anger she had been bottling up inside threatened to rise to the surface as she realized what was happening.

Count Soames wouldn't go after her like this just because he recognized her and remember what happened at the Elysian Proclamation. No, he would only do this if he had something to *gain* from it. If someone had *told* him to.

Scarlett couldn't interfere with the being inside Rosa, and the being couldn't interfere directly with her or her surroundings in return. That was the pact that they had made. But it seemed the being could at least partially skirt those restraints by having its pawn harass her instead. It wouldn't surprise her if this was only the demon's way of messing with her. Actually sending Count Soames to harm her would almost definitely break their pact.

That said, even this much was a lot more than Scarlett was willing to allow.

"Count Soames, am I correct?" Raimond spoke from next to Scarlett. As always, he maintained a relaxed smile even as he addressed a high-born noble. "I have heard talkings of your estimable and impressive personage, but never would I have expected it to be *exactly* as..." He coughed lightly in his hand, just as the man had done before "...*impressive*...as they said. I am sure you are blessed with nothing but the best when it comes to the realm of connoisseurship and cuisine. As a fellow enjoyer of the finer things in life as well, I cannot do anything but express my greatest admiration for what is clearly an example of your purest dedication."

A frown appeared on the Count's face as he stared at the priest. Livvi and Evelyne were looking at Raimond with worried expressions now.

"With that said," he continued. "Perhaps there is a better time and place for this? While I can certainly understand your wonder at Baroness Hartford's presence tonight—I myself, as a follower of Ittar, was quite awestruck by the devoutness and humility showed by her in the past—tonight *is* a night meant for revelry and joyous conversation, is it not? We wouldn't to inconvenience the host that has been gracious enough to invite us into his home to partake in his celebrations."

The Count turned his head to look in the direction of the ballroom's center, where, through a small opening in the crowd, Duke Tyndall was visible. The man was looking at them, and seemed to be eyeing Scarlett specifically. Then he turned away, returning to some other conversation as if she didn't exist.

A smirk grew on Count Soames' face. "I don't think that will be an issue..." He studied Raimond's appearance, probably spotting some of the suns that decorated the man's clothing. "...*priest*."

"Excuse me," Livvi said, and it looked as if Evelyne was also considering saying something, but Scarlett raised a hand to silence both of them.

She then steered all of her attention to the Count, ignoring the dozens of eyes that were on them.

"Count Soames." She spoke slowly, letting some of the irritation bleed through into her voice as she started walking towards him. "Correct me if I am wrong, but this is the first time we speak, yes?"

His look turned slightly warier, though his self-assured stance didn't change. "It is the first time we speak, yes."

"I thought as much," she said. "You see, those that are acquainted with me know not do make the mistake that you just did." It did not take her long to reach the man, and she stopped one step short of him, meeting his eyes.

"Mistake, you say?" He didn't shy away from her gaze, a hint of amusement showing in his expression. He was probably thinking she was the one making a mistake. "I don't think there was anything inaccurate about what I said? In fact, my words were—"

"Let me correct you."

The man's eyes widened as Scarlett's pyrokinesis took hold of him, shooting up the temperature immediately surrounding his body. His mouth opened, but she leaned closer to his side before he could speak.

"Do not think that your master will protect you simply because they were the one that ordered you to meddle in my affairs." She spoke quietly, so no one else would hear.

The man's words blubbed off, and he gaped at her. Clearly, he hadn't been told much.

"Your master has seen fit to use you as a pawn in a flippant attempt at pestering me when she herself lacks the power to do so. I am not above pettiness, so do not presume that I will not stoop to swatting a pesky fly that believes it can interfere with me, regardless of who it might serve. I have had my eyes on what you have been up to in the Silkspindle Ward of Ambercrest, Count. It would only take a few words from me to ensure you lose everything that you have, so I suggest that you be *very* careful with what you say."

Sweat had already started dripping down the man's forehead from the heat. It was clear he wasn't trying to show it, but Scarlett could tell that he was also having a hard time breathing. She had to commend his self-control and that he hadn't cried out about what she was doing. Maybe the fact that he was staring at her as if he was staring at the devil herself played into that fact. It was amazing how quickly his attitude had changed.

She leaned back from him, speaking louder again so that everybody listening could hear. "I rarely bother with correcting others' mistakes or offering them advice, even when I see they are misinformed. Lately, however, I have been trying to change myself, so I can forgive a situation where it is clear that a misunderstanding has occurred."

She released the hold her pyrokinesis had on the air around the man, and his entire demeanor seemed to relax. Credit was due for how quickly he managed to recover his previous composure as well, bringing out a napkin from a pocket as he hid small coughs and dabbed away the sweat from his face.

It was probably a strange sight for those around them.

"I see what you mean, Baroness," the man said, sounding a little strained. "No, when you put it like that, I realize that my previous words could have been interpreted in a way I did not intend." He returned the napkin to its pocket and ignored the perplexed gazes aimed at him

with gusto, his attention focused solely on Scarlett. Though he *did* avoid looking her in the eyes now. “My apologies for any confusion that might have caused. I will make sure to give due consideration in the future in case of similar happenings. I have caused undue commotion, however, so I will take my leave for now.”

He looked collected, but it seemed like the man couldn't wait to get away from her as he turned around without waiting for her to respond and walked away, passing by the group he had been conversing with earlier.

She observed him as he disappeared among the crowd.

The being inside Rosa probably didn't even care what happened today. It knew Scarlett couldn't touch Count Soames as long as their deal stood, and it wouldn't rely on means like this if it actually meant to oppose her this early. Most likely, all of this was just one big game to amuse it.

But Scarlett didn't like *playing games* in this way. It had made the first move against her now. That only spelled what it thought of her. Like hell she would just let it *pass*.

Everybody's eyes had turned to her, but she ignored them as well as she turned back to her group. Evelyne and Livvi were staring at her as if she had just pulled down the moon, while Raimond was giving her a curious and amused look. It wouldn't surprise her if the priest had been able to see her use of magic even without using a spell.

She walked back up and stopped before them.

“So, where were we?”