

143: Connections

Scarlett watched the other guests' interactions with an impassive expression from where she stood, ignoring the veiled looks that were occasionally sent her way. She had heard a few comments about what her relationship with Beldon Tyndall might be and some curious questions about why she was here, but nothing too bad.

She sipped at her glass of wine, still considering what to do next, when the music in the ballroom swelled and people started shuffling away from the room's center. There, a glossy floor surface of checkered black-and-white arranged in a circle was revealed. Guests walked out on the floor in pairs and began dancing slowly to the music as more people flowed into the room from the other connecting chambers. Soon, the room was swarming with even more activity than before.

She held back a scowl as people crowded closer to her, trying to make use of the empty space she had created. Not waiting to get locked in by a mob of newcomers, she placed her wineglass on one of the nearby tables and made her way towards the closest wall. There, she started walking towards the closest side chamber she saw. The people there didn't seem as focused on dancing and all that, and it wasn't as packed.

It still took her a couple of minutes of manoeuvring to get past the crowds, but eventually she reached a white marble archway and passed through a short glass corridor into the chamber. She was surprised to find that the noise from behind her immediately became a lot more subdued, almost as if there were several thick doors between this room and the ballroom. Here, the atmosphere was a lot calmer, with relaxed discussions between the people and comfortable music being played by a small band in the room's corner.

The space could probably hold around a hundred people, but it was only half full. The walls were painted a soft shade of lavender, with plush armchairs and sofas arranged near the walls, though most people were standing in small groups spread out around the place.

Scarlett paused as she spotted a familiar face. Not far from her was Livvi, speaking with a man and woman Scarlett didn't recognize. The short noblewoman had her hair tied back in a neat bun and was dressed in a light teal-blue dress that ended in a skirt slightly beneath her knees. The light reflected in the woman's gold-rimmed glasses as her eyes seemed to land on Scarlett, and a look of surprise entered her face.

A moment later, the woman turned back to her conversational partners, telling them something and receiving generous smiles in return. Then she left them and started walking up to Scarlett.

"Scarlett? You're here?" Livvi stopped in front of her, seeming to take in her appearance. "You look great in that dress, by the way."

"You as well," Scarlett replied, glancing over the woman's shoulder at the people she had been talking to. Their clothes didn't look quite as extravagant as some of the others tonight, so they might not be nobles. Perhaps members of the Shields Guild? The Tyndall Ball was open to all classes, as long as you had an invitation.

Livvi studied her for a bit longer. “You never mentioned that you would attend today’s ball. I didn’t think you would, considering, you know…” the woman trailed off into a slightly awkward expression. Immediately after, she shook her head firmly, however, as if waving away those concerns. “Never mind that. I’m happy that you’re here.”

The genuine smile she showed made Scarlett uncomfortable. She always had difficulty interpreting the feelings the original left behind when it came to Livvi.

“...I am acquainted with Beldon Tyndall. Procuring an invitation for tonight provided little challenge.”

“Really? That’s great.” Livvi looked around and behind Scarlett as if she would find somebody hiding there. “Is Evelyne here as well?”

Scarlett watched her actions for a moment before answering. “She is, though I do not know where currently. I will meet up with her later.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” That seemed to make the woman even happier. “And how are you, Scarlett?”

She hesitated for a moment, uncertain how to respond to that. “I am fine.”

A worried expression appeared on Livvi’s face. “Just fine?”

“Fine is more than enough for the time being,” Scarlett said. She creased her forehead. “And what of you? Are you back to your work with the Shields Guild?”

Livvi eyed her for a breath longer before giving a slow, almost reluctant nod. “Yes, although they have transferred me from my old station. I’m currently helping with managing and administering the collaborative efforts the Guild has been performing lately to deal with the Tribe of Sin’s erratic appearances and the increasing number of monster showings. I’ve had my hands full ever since I got back, so it’s a miracle that I had time to join my father and brother here tonight.”

Scarlett raised a brow. That explained why she hadn’t heard anything from Kat for a while. The Shielder must still be busy running all across the empire, dealing with whatever messes were popping up.

Did that also mean Livvi was privy to some of the more sensitive information that the Guild held, or had connections to its leadership here in the empire? The way the woman said it didn’t make it sound like she held a prominent position, but from what Scarlett had heard, Livvi *was* supposed to be very capable. The guild might not want to waste her skills.

Maybe it would be useful to be acquainted with her in the future.

“I hope the situation has not deteriorated too much,” she said, for lack of a better thing to say.

“It’s...manageable, for now.” Livvi grimaced. “Most senior Shielders above C-rank are almost constantly occupied with something, and me and my colleagues are busy as bees trying to move them around where they’re needed and making up for their absence at the

various branches. I'm honestly surprised the Elystead branch allowed the two C-ranked Shielders you have working for you to stay, considering these circumstances." She paused, her eyes widening a little. "Oh, I'm not saying that's *bad*, Scarlett. I think it's still important that the Guild can carry out their usual services to the empire's citizens, even during times like this. It's just surprising, that's all."

"Is that so?"

Scarlett knew that the Guild had some interest in her and her knowledge, so it wasn't strange at all from her perspective. But clearly Livvi didn't know all the details regarding her situation.

"Ah, but that's not what tonight is about." Livvi seemed to have noticed the serious atmosphere that had built up. "Sorry for bringing up these things when you were just asking how I was."

"There is nothing to apologise for." Scarlett reassured her. "In fact, I am grateful for the opportunity to hear more of the Shields Guild's current situation. I have associates who are affected by these matters, so I have an interest in keeping myself informed."

She read the Empyrean Chronicle each week, but discounting its first coverage of the Tribe of Sin's attack on Brinewick and other minor settlements across the empire, the newspaper hadn't written much about the situation at the moment.

"Really?" Livvi looked somewhat surprised by that. "If so, you can ask me about it later and I'll give you what answers I can. I can't promise to answer *all* questions, but hopefully I can at least be of a little help."

"That would be much appreciated," Scarlett said.

In addition to how things were going for Kat, she was curious about the Guild's general movements, as well as the Tribe's. It would also be good to know what the S-ranked Shielders were currently up to. She knew that Arnaud Astrey, Allyssa's father, should still be busy with his own stuff somewhere in the Unresting Steppes. But Gratianus Graham and Rosanna Adlam would still be active here in the empire and helping against the Cabal.

Would one of them be here tonight? Maybe not. There were bound to be a few big names present, but like Livvi had said, most Shielders were busy. That probably went twice over for the two strongest ones present in the empire.

"Why, if it isn't our dear Baroness," a voice sounded out from the side. "I was wondering when I would run into you."

Scarlett turned to see an older lady with greying hair and a flowing black dress approach them, followed by a blonde woman maybe a few years Scarlett's senior.

"Lady Withersworth. It has been some time since our last meeting. It is a pleasure to see you."

“Oh, I should be the one saying that, dear.” The older woman wore a smile on her face as she stopped in front of them, shifting her eyes to look over at Livvi. “You are Miss Livvi Knottley, is that right? That brute Guifford’s daughter, if I recall.”

Livvi showed an embarrassed smile. “That is correct, yes. It’s a pleasure meeting you, Lady Withersworth. I apologize for anything my father might have done to offend you, but if I may... Can I ask that you don’t refer to him in that way?”

Lady Withersworth waved a hand in the air. “Of course. That was rather rude of me. I do not particularly dislike your father, but he and my dear old husband have gotten into enough arguments over the years that all of his grumblings have rubbed off on me.”

“Ah, yes... My father can be a bit brusque at times.”

“Oh, I am well aware.” A smirk played on the older lady’s lips as she replied, then she turned her attention back to Scarlett and gestured to the blonde woman beside her. “Baroness, Miss Livvi, let me introduce my errant daughter, Lorena. It has been far too long since I have had the honor of introducing her at an event like this.”

“Mother...”

“She used to be the jewel of my eye, you see, but now she is a member of the Ustrum Assembly and *far* too busy to pay her old mother any mind.”

The woman let out a low groan. “*Mother*. I already apologized for not informing you I would be here tonight, but that is because I knew you would already be aware. And I would like to remind you that *you* also chose not to inform me that you and father would be here as well.”

“Of course we didn’t. If we did, you could have chosen not to come simply to avoid us!”

“You know I wouldn’t do that.”

Lady Withersworth let out a small scoff. “I would certainly hope not.”

Lorena seemed to hold back another groan, and she turned to Scarlett and Livvi. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintances. Baroness, Miss Livvi.”

“Likewise,” Scarlett responded.

Livvi eyed the mother and daughter pair for a moment before returning the greeting as well. Scarlett wasn’t sure if the woman thought their interaction strange or not—most nobles probably wouldn’t act like this in public—but Livvi’s father wasn’t too much different if you asked her.

She turned her attention to Lorena. “What is it that you do at the Ustrum Assembly?”

“I am a member of the Council of Magical Exchange. We are in charge of most interactions and projects that the Assembly conducts with the mage towers, the Rising Isle, and other mage institutions,” the woman answered. “it is not quite as impressive as it might sound, as it

mostly means I get to spend most of my time reading through proposals and deciding upon grants for magical research.”

“Quite the opposite. That sounds to me like a rather important position. Were you perhaps involved with the recent collaboration that the Ustrum Assembly had with Elystead Tower and the Rising Isle?” Scarlett asked.

Lorena looked surprised at that question. “I wasn’t part of the actual project, but I was one of the members that decided upon its scope and execution. I wouldn’t have thought you would have heard of that, Baroness.”

“One of the wizards from Elystead Tower that took part is a recent associate of mine.”

“Ah, I see.”

Lady Withersworth gestured at Scarlett. “The Baroness happens to be a benefactor of our house, as well as the reason your father and I decided to attend this year’s ball.”

Lorena looked at her with even more surprise now. “I have to ask how you managed that. My father hates these events.”

“I do not believe I did anything especially noteworthy,” Scarlett said. “To me, it appeared as if your mother was the primary actor behind convincing him.”

“Nonsense.” Lady Withersworth smiled at her. “My husband is beyond grateful for your help, though he might lack the decency to show it.”

“Ehm, what exactly did you help them with?” Livvi asked with a perplexed expression.

“There was an issue in their fief with a haunted piece of land,” Scarlett answered. “Myself and my retainers dealt with it along with Sir Leon’s aid last month.”

“An ‘issue’ indeed.” Lady Withersworth sounded amused by her description. “It had been bothering my husband to the point where his hair was falling out, and I certainly saw no solution in sight. That was when our dear Baroness here swept in and resolved it within a day. Both me and my husband have offered our gratitude in more than one way, but I have found that the Baroness is far more humble about her achievements than one would expect.”

“I do not believe humbleness is the correct word to describe my actions.”

“As my husband would say, if the scarf fits, then do not shy away from donning it,” the woman said. “Anyhow, where is that strapping young knight of yours at the moment? Is he not in attendance tonight?”

“*Mother,*” Lorena chided.

Lady Withersworth simply laughed it off. “Oh, you young people. I stopped caring about appearances the moment your father stepped down from his office. It was the second best decision I have ever made.”

Scarlett cleared her throat softly. "I am not certain whether or not Sir Leon is here tonight. I have not heard from him for a month. It would perhaps be best to inquire with his family for more details."

She certainly couldn't do that herself, at least. Not only was the relationship between the Delmons and her the very definition of shaky at the moment, but she also simply didn't know what they looked like. She had a vague recollection of Marquis Delmon's appearance, since she saw him perform his oaths during the Elysian Proclamation, but that was about it.

"That is a shame," Lady Withersworth said. "Perhaps it is best to leave it be for now, then. If I were to approach Edita asking about her son, it would most likely invite far more trouble than it is worth."

Scarlett eyed the woman. Lord Withersworth had said something similar the last time they spoke. It seemed as if the Delmons and the Withersworths weren't on the best footing with each other.

"Mother." Another voice called out, and they all turned to look at a man in his late thirties moving towards them. He had dark brown hair and wore a black velvet jacket with silver buttons. Walking by his side and slightly behind was a young boy of maybe eight or nine, dressed in a miniature version of the man's attire and with a head full of combed light-brown hair.

The man had his attention focused on Lorena and Lady Withersworth as he stopped in front of them. "I thought you said for *us* not to go anywhere, but then I find you and Lorena missing almost the minute I turn my head."

The older woman only looked at him for a moment before turning to the small boy with a motherly smile. "It seems as if I have made you and your father worry. I hope you haven't walked around for too long."

The boy shook his head gently.

That seemed to please her as she looked back at Scarlett and Livvi. "This here is my son Reymond and my grandson Lucan. Lucan dear, Reymond. These two are Baroness Scarlett Hartford and Miss Livvi Knottley."

The man performed a small bow towards them. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Baroness, Miss Livvi."

His son mimicked his action.

Scarlett kept her eyes on the young boy for a moment. From what she'd seen, it didn't seem that common for nobles to bring their children along to this ball. She imagined it must be quite boring for most kids to stay in a place full of adults like this.

"Reymond," Lorena said. "You might be shocked to hear that the Baroness here was the reason mother and father chose to attend this time."

The man turned to her with surprise evident on his face, then looked back at Scarlett. "I am afraid I'm going to have to ask how that happened."

"Apparently, the Baroness resolved an issue in our barony that had been driving father mad. And since I can only recall one thing that fits the description..."

Now, Reymond stared at Scarlett. "You were the one that dealt with the mansion?"

She nodded. "That is correct."

His son pulled at his leg.

"Dad," the boy spoke in a hushed voice. "Was the mansion the bad place you spoke about?"

"Ah, yes, that's right, Lucan." Reymond looked down at his son. "Dozens upon dozens of people have looked at it over the years, and no one could help."

Lucan's eyes widened at Scarlett. "Does that mean you are better than all those other people?"

She blinked.

Next to her, Livvi let out a small laugh. "I don't think I've seen that expression on your face since we were children, Scarlett."

She furrowed her brows, turning to the woman. "It was simply an unexpected question." She shifted her attention back to the boy. "As for whether I am better than all of them, I highly doubt it. I simply happened to be in possession of some information they were not, allowing for methods that were not open to them."

He didn't quite seem to follow what she said, but his father nodded. "Nonetheless, I can now understand why father and mother are so appreciative towards you. I would also like to extend my thanks for helping our family."

"Your family has already shown more than enough gratitude. There is no need for more."

"You will have to learn that not everything is done out of gratitude, Baroness," Lady Withersworth said. "Especially not when you reach my age. Sometimes you simply have to follow what looks interesting."

Both her children seemed to cringe at her words, but they also seemed used to her behaviour.

The woman shifted her eyes back to her son. "Before I forget, did I not I ask you to find your father? Where is he?"

"He was in one of the other rooms," Reymond answered. "I told him you were looking for him, but he was speaking with his companions and said he would find us later."

"Find us *later*?" There was a sharpness in her voice now. A brief silence fell on them, then the woman's expression relaxed slightly and she gestured for her son to move. "Come, show

the way. This is as good an opportunity as any.” She looked at Scarlett. “Why don’t you join us, Baroness? That senile old man always gets too caught up in his tomfoolery, but at the very least he has some useful connections. I will introduce you to them. You can come as well if you wish, Miss Livvi.”

“Ah, no, that is all right.” Livvi held up a hand. “I would love to join you, but I have to find my brother before I do anything else tonight. There are a few things I needed to talk to him about.” Her eyes moved to Scarlett. “I’ll see you later if we get the chance, Scarlett.”

“Very well.” Scarlett nodded, and the bespectacled woman turned to leave.

“If you’re going to go and find father, I think I will leave you for now as well,” Lorena said. She looked to her brother and his son. “If you want, I can take Lucan and find his Catherine while you guide mother.”

“I would appreciate that.” Reymond gently pushed forward his son. “Lucan, go with your aunt and find your mother. I’ll meet up with you later.”

The boy stepped up to Lorena, though he did send a few glances Scarlett’s way as the woman brought him away.

Reymond and Lady Withersworth then took Scarlett along with them as they left the room. Instead of walking through the main ballroom which was still bustling with activity, they moved through one of the glass corridors that circled the place until they reached one of the other side chambers. Here, several oak tables and simple furnishings were spread around the place, with an open fireplace at the center of the room. Gathered around one of the tables, with drinks in their hands, stood a group of older gentlemen that let out loud laughs as they talked. Lord Withersworth stood out among them.

Lady Withersworth and her son walked toward the group, with Scarlett following.

“So this is where you are lounging away your time,” the woman said. “I should have known that the moment I take my eyes off you, you would find some of your old companions to rendezvous with.”

Her husband’s eyes shifted to her, his brows furrowing. Several more laughs left the other men around him as they all looked towards the woman.

“It seems you weren’t quite as accomplished in slipping away as you thought,” one of the men said with a grin, and Lord Withersworth grumbled under his breath.

Scarlett only paid attention to that for a moment, however, as her focus was caught on one of the other people in the group.

He was an older gentleman, perhaps in his late sixties or early seventies, and had full, flowing silver-grey hair with a well-trimmed beard. A long cape made of lustrous black fabric fell elegantly behind him, lined with scarlet-red silk on the inside. Beneath the cape, he wore a simple, yet well-tailored suit that was the same black as the cape, with a deep red shirt beneath. Both hands were covered by a pair of dark gloves, as well.

While he was what many from Scarlett's old world might have described as a 'silver fox', his appearance wasn't what primarily caught her attention. Rather, it was the name that popped up at the back of her mind upon seeing him.

Warley Godwin.

The dean of Elystead Tower, and one of the most powerful magic practitioners in the empire.

An archmage in the flesh.