

## 264: The \*mingling\*

As Scarlett and Lady Withersworth approached the group of richly dressed individuals, their conversation dwindled to a murmur. Curious eyes turned towards them, and though Lady Withersworth walked with an air of casual elegance, her presence did command a certain attention, subtly shifting the atmosphere.

“Good evening,” the woman greeted warmly. The assembly comprised men and women of various ages, some surprisingly young, others closer to Lady Withersworth’s age. “Count Braxton, Baron Redi, how delightful to see you both here again. Lady Graeme, Lady Huxley, it is a pleasure to reunite with you as well.”

Four of the older members of the group nodded in acknowledgement.

“Lady Withersworth, it has been some time,” Lady Graeme, an older woman with partially greying hair arranged in a neat bun, said.

Lady Withersworth’s smile was sincere as she gestured towards Scarlett. “Allow me to introduce my companion. This is Baroness Scarlett Hartford. Some of you may not have met her yet, but I’m sure you have heard of her by now.”

The older nobles’ expressions remained composed, but Scarlett noticed some of the younger ones shifting uncomfortably, except for one — a young woman, likely younger than even Evelyne, with long dark hair in a braid, who regarded Scarlett intently.

“Indeed, there has been quite a buzz about Baroness Hartford lately,” Baron Reid, a distinguished man with a meticulously trimmed mustache, remarked.

Scarlett turned her attention to him. Was that really true? She would have thought she’d be old news among noble circles by this point.

Lady Withersworth gracefully picked up a wine glass from the tray of a passing attendant, swirling it slowly. “I have been staying at Baroness Hartford’s estate in Freybrook recently. She has been exceptionally hospitable after my own home in Autumnwell was destroyed in the attacks.”

“Ah, I did hear something to that effect,” Lady Graeme said. “Apparently, you’ve involved yourself in some charitable endeavours as well. How commendable.”

“In a manner of speaking, though it is actually an initiative spearheaded by our industrious Baroness here and her younger sister. They are truly committed to

supporting the empire through these challenging times. At my age, I can't help but admire the drive of the younger generation, so I decided to lend her my assistance."

"How wonderful."

"Indeed, that is a rather admirable venture."

"With more people like the Baroness, the empire will surely overcome these challenges."

Several members of the group offered their own polite but non-committal comments. Lady Withersworth's presence likely had a lot to do with that. When Scarlett's eyes landed on some of the younger nobles, though, she noticed they awkwardly avoided meeting her gaze.

Were they...*intimidated* by her?

Where did that come from? She knew she didn't have the friendliest appearance, but she hadn't even spoken to most of these people yet, and they weren't children.

To her left, Scarlett could see a slight smile playing on Lady Withersworth's lips.

One of the older noble ladies seemed to sense the unease in a younger woman beside her. Clearing her throat, the woman turned her attention to Scarlett. "Baroness Hartford, it is actually quite interesting to meet you in person at this time. The Emyreal Chronicle recently wrote a column about you that I found rather fascinating."

A small scowl formed on Scarlett's face.

Right, that had been a thing. The week before, the Emyreal Chronicle had caught wind of the relief initiatives performed by her barony and written a short piece on it. She wasn't sure if they just happened to hear about it in the process, but they also ended up mentioning the orphanage set up in her name as well as the rumors about her killing a dragon, painting her as some kind of dragon-slaying saint.

While the depiction wasn't necessarily bad for her, it was far from reality, and that fact alone rubbed her the wrong way in this case. She'd also found it suspicious how eager the Emyreal Chronicle had been to write about her. After some digging, though, she had realised that Beldon had pulled a few strings on that end.

That said, she wasn't sure which part of that depiction would make the other nobles afraid of her. Perhaps it was a mix of the dragon-slaying rumors and stories about the old Scarlett. Maybe they had even heard about her confrontation with Count Soames at

the Tyndall ball. If these were people who had spoken ill of her before, they might now think it best not to cross her.

A moment of silence settled over the group of nobles, and Scarlett felt a twinge of embarrassment as she realised she was the cause. With an inward sigh, she schooled her expression as best she could, though she briefly questioned why she even bothered.

One of the nobles, evidently more uncomfortable with the silence than with Scarlett's presence, finally spoke up. "Is it true that you killed a dragon?" he asked.

Scarlett looked at him. "Do you believe I could accomplish such a feat alone?" she replied curtly.

The man appeared taken aback by her directness. "... I'm not sure. That is why I asked."

"Your father was a skilled mage, was he not, Baroness?" Count Braxton, an older gentleman in a finely tailored suit with dark hair meticulously combed back, said. "I witnessed some of your abilities at the Tyndall ball, so to me, it would seem magecraft runs in the family."

Scarlett leveled her gaze at him for a few seconds. "...Perhaps. However, I did not kill that dragon."

The news piece hadn't even claimed that she did. It was frankly weird how long-lasting this rumor was proving.

"But it did inexplicably appear dead in her courtyard," Lady Withersworth added in an amused voice. When Scarlett glanced at her, she received a knowing smile in return. "Having spent enough time around the Baroness, I have learned that there is often more interesting events happening around her than even what the occasional rumor would suggest."

"It does appear as if Baroness Hartford leads a rather eventful life," Lady Huxley chimed in. "I'm sure our children could learn much from someone as...*accomplished* as her."

Scarlett's expression darkened slightly at the tone in Lady Huxley's voice, but before she could respond, the young woman who had been observing her intently earlier spoke.

"Baroness, if I may ask, how long did it take for you to become as skilled a mage as you are?"

Scarlett paused, turning her attention to her. "...I am not a true mage, but even so, a not insignificant amount of time."

The young woman's gaze remained serious. "Do you think I could achieve the same?"

Count Braxton, standing beside her, seemed to flinch at the question, though he maintained his polite demeanour. Was he her father, perhaps?

Scarlett regarded the young woman thoughtfully. "It is certainly possible. However, I would not recommend it lightly. Achieving a level of proficiency similar to mine requires immense time and dedication for most people, with little use outside of combat. Unless you plan to devote your life to defending the empire or exploring perilous territories as a Shielder or the like, there are many other worthy pursuits."

The woman looked slightly disappointed by her response, while Count Braxton appeared relieved. Scarlett didn't much care either way.

From there, Lady Withersworth took charge of the conversation, steering it towards ongoing events and eliciting information and small talk from the different nobles. Scarlett contributed occasionally, but it was clear that Lady Withersworth was the one who was accustomed to this kind of dialogue. Even when she allowed others to speak, the flow remained firmly under her control. More than once, she directed the topics towards what actions nobles like them could take for the empire under the current circumstances, seeming to subtly set up potential avenues and collaborations for Scarlett in the future.

Eventually, long after Scarlett had grown weary of all the talking, Lady Withersworth seemed to decide they had spent enough time with this group and excused them. For a brief moment, Scarlett thought her social obligations were over, but then Lady Withersworth simply spotted another group of influential-looking people and brought Scarlett along towards them.

This pattern continued, with Lady Withersworth introducing Scarlett to various important figures, showcasing her to friends and acquaintances alike, along with comments on their personalities and influence. For Scarlett, maintaining a facade of relative cordiality was exhausting, but with Lady Withersworth's help, she managed to find a rhythm in these interactions. She wasn't sure if she ever made a great impression on her own, but people seemed to respect her more now than they did immediately after the Elysian Proclamation.

After navigating through at least half a dozen different groups across the banquet hall, Scarlett wanted little more than to simply sit down and take a break. That was when

Lady Withersworth spotted yet another target. This time, Scarlett was about to voice her protest when she saw who it was.

Gathered around a small round table adorned with refreshments was a group deep in discussion. One of them, a portly man in his late fifties with neck-length hair streaked white, had a ruffled face and a thin mustache while leaning heavily on a cane in his right hand.

Duke Ingomar Valentino of Bridgespell.

Beside him stood his wife, Duchess Lenka Valentino, engaged in conversation with another couple that Scarlett vaguely recognised. Viscount and Viscountess Clapham, if she wasn't misremembering. She'd met them once at that wedding she had accidentally crashed in Ambercrest all those months ago.

She supposed she could stomach *one* more social interaction.

As she and Lady Withersworth approached, Scarlett scanned the room for a drink. Spotting a nearby attendant, she signaled for a glass as they passed.

"My! Lila, is that you?" Lady Valentino exclaimed as she noticed them, drawing the rest of the group's attention as well.

"Who else, Lenka?" Lady Withersworth replied sociably, stopping in front of their table.

"I thought I saw you earlier, but you haven't attended such serious gatherings in years, so I wondered if I was imagining things!" The duchess shook her head with a laugh. "What a welcome surprise."

"It's a joy to see you too, Lenka." Lady Withersworth turned to Duke Valentino. "And Ingomar, I see you've put on even more weight since I last saw you. I heard about your son. I hope he is recuperating well."

The man regarded her for a moment before nodding slightly. "Lila. And yes, so do I."

Lady Withersworth then addressed the Viscount and Viscountess. "It has been quite some time since we last spoke, hasn't it?"

"It has, it has," the Viscount replied. "My wife spotted you earlier and suggested we seek you out, but it seems that won't be necessary."

His wife smiled pleasantly. "I must say, I am surprised to see you here, Lady Withersworth. And in your current company, as well." She turned her attention to Scarlett. "It's wonderful to see you again, dear. Our last meeting felt far too brief."

“Are you familiar with Baroness Hartford, Lady Clapham?”

Lady Clapham nodded. “We have met once before, yes, and I believe my husband knew her father. How did you come to know her, if I might ask?”

The duchess placed a hand on her husband’s arm, gesturing towards Scarlett. “The Baroness assisted my husband with some important matters a few weeks ago, and I had the pleasure of speaking with her during that time. Isn’t that right, Ingomar?”

“...Yes,” the duke almost muttered, eyeing Scarlett.

“How delightful,” Lady Withersworth said. “It seems everyone here is already acquainted. No need for the lofty introductions, then.”

Scarlett had her attention on Duke Valentino. “I did not expect your presence here tonight, Your Grace.”

She knew that Bridgespell had been heavily impacted by the monster attacks, and reports suggested the incursions near the city were growing more intense. Given the city’s precarious situation, not to mention the fact that it was still dealing with the aftermath of the Citadel incident, Duke Valentino was probably one of the busiest nobles in the empire right now. Despite this, he had made time to attend this gathering where other people like Duke Tyndall or Marquis Delmon hadn’t.

“I had little choice, regrettably,” the duke replied, his tone edged with annoyance. He studied Scarlett briefly before shifting his gaze to Lady Withersworth. “So, Lila, the rumors of you taking on a new protégé were true after all.”

“Oh?” Lady Withersworth raised a hand to her mouth in feigned surprise. “Are those the rumors circulating?”

“Don’t pretend you had no hand in them,” the duke said. He scanned the room. “Where is that husband of yours? I hear he’s been quite busy these past two weeks.”

Lady Withersworth clicked her tongue and waved dismissively. “That oaf is somewhere around, I’m sure, but I haven’t seen him yet. He’s likely engrossed in some ‘important’ business or other with the others of his ilk.”

A slight frown appeared on Duke Valentino’s brow. “I see. He’s not the only notable absence tonight, even among those one would have expected.”

Lady Withersworth’s expression turned more serious. “Is there something you know?”

He shook his head irritably. “The Imperial Family has kept me in the dark completely about their plans for tonight.”

“That does sound rather concerning,” Viscount Clapham said.

Scarlett listened in on their conversation. It sounded like something was going on, though she wasn’t sure what. It could be related to the political maneuvering Beldon had told her about, with certain factions pushing for rather extreme policies, but she doubted Lord Withersworth would be involved with most of that.

“No matter. There is little we can do but wait,” Duke Valentino finally said. He turned his attention back to Scarlett. “As for you, Baroness, it seems you’ve kept yourself busy since causing a stir in my city. It’s remarkable how one noble can find themselves in so many predicaments. I hear you somehow even convinced the Chancellery to send you to the Rising Isle.”

Scarlett arched an eyebrow. “I did not expect you to take an interest in my endeavours, Your Grace.”

“Do not flatter yourself, Baroness,” he grumbled. “I have associates within the Chancellery who informed me after learning of our recent collaborations. Apparently, they have quite...tied up in discussions with the Isle’s wizards since your visit.”

Scarlett would hope so. She wasn’t privy to the precise details of what the Chancellery had gained from her trip to the Rising Isle, but she doubted it was nothing. For her part, she was more concerned with the Isle’s council fulfilling their promises to her. Though she had cut negotiations short due to the empire’s current situation, they owed her a rather considerable debt now.

As long as they didn’t learn about her breaking into the Veiled Library, naturally.

“I feel somewhat left out,” Viscount Clapham remarked. “I wasn’t aware the Baroness had even visited the Rising Isle. What did you do there?”

Scarlett turned to him. “I was there on a project to exchange knowledge related to Zuverian mysteries and artifacts. Perhaps you did not know, but I have spent much of the past few months researching the topic, and the Rising Isle was interested in my expertise.”

The viscount looked surprised. “Why, I hadn’t heard about that at all. Impressive, I must say. I’d love to hear more about it sometime, if the opportunity arises.”

“I would also be interested in hearing more about this,” Lady Withersworth added, giving Scarlett a curious, but almost chiding, look.

Scarlett met the older woman's eyes for a moment.

Right, she hadn't actually shared much about any of that with the woman, and unlike some of her other activities, Scarlett's work on Zuverian artifacts and the like wasn't as widely shared outside of mage circles. She wondered if Lady Withersworth saw this as a lost opportunity of some kind.

"This is not the place for such a discussion, but perhaps when the time allows," Scarlett said.

"Of course, dear." Lady Withersworth gave a gracious nod. "Speaking of Zuverian research, I recall that the first princess was quite famously invested in the topic."

Scarlett noticed the duke's expression grow more tense at the sudden change in topic.

Lady Withersworth simply smiled at the man as she continued. "I have also heard rumors that she might have visited Bridgespell recently to investigate some ruins there. Is this true?"

Duke Valentino eyed the woman warily before casting a single glance at Scarlett, who maintained a neutral expression. She hadn't shared any information about the princess' visit. The princess' disappearance was still supposed to be a secret, as far as she was aware. Even more so her investigation of the Zuverian ruins near Bridgespell. If Lady Withersworth somehow knew, it meant information had leaked.

Were there actually rumors circulating about this? Or did Lady Withersworth have unique sources? If she was asking the question so publicly, the former seemed more likely, but perhaps it was a mix of both. Judging from the current situation, the woman was using her question as a way of probing for information as well.

Whatever the case, Scarlett did not want to take the blame for however things got out. She would need to ask Lady Withersworth about her sources later.

Duke Valentino shifted his weight off his can. "I don't know where you heard that, but I know nothing about it. Perhaps you should spend less time listening to the gossip at tea parties and more to credible sources."

Lady Withersworth let out a light chuckle. "No need to worry. I assure you, I listen plenty to both." She glanced around and added, "But let's not dwell on serious matters here. We will have ample time for that later in the evening."

Following her usual approach, the woman deftly shifted the topic, inquiring about what they had been discussing before, helping ease Scarlett into the conversation. It did help



that, this time, Scarlett was at least partly familiar with half of the people they were talking to, even if the duke wasn't her biggest fan.

Their talks continued for a while longer until movement around the banquet hall started increasing, with more attendants arriving.

"It appears we will soon be relocating," Viscount Clapham said while studying their surroundings.

Scarlett's gaze moved to the exits and entrances of the room, where Solar Knights were changing posts. Her attention was drawn to a familiar face entering the banquet hall to stand guard next to one of the larger exits.

It wasn't Leon, but rather a woman with long copper-blond hair tied up in a ponytail, clad in black-gold armor with a sword at her side.

Dame...Trista, was it?

If Scarlett recalled correctly, she was both a friend and compatriot of Leon's, as well as someone who had a strong dislike for the original Scarlett. She also just happened to be the bride whose wedding Scarlett had inadvertently crashed.

Interacting with her probably wasn't the best idea right now, but Scarlett did have a couple of questions she wanted to ask.

"Excuse me for a moment," she told Lady Withersworth and the group, earning a few curious looks as she stepped away.

As Scarlett made her way across the hall towards Dame Trista, the knight noticed her approach. The expression on Trista's face immediately darkened, her features tightening with visible displeasure.

Honestly, Scarlett couldn't blame her. She was the bride whose wedding Scarlett had inadvertently crashed that one time, after all.