

144: Meet the League of Extraordinary—

Scarlett stared at Dean Godwin. She hadn't quite been prepared to run into the man this suddenly.

Lord Withersworth cleared his throat. "Ahem. Dear, what brings you here?" he asked, looking at his wife and son before glancing at Scarlett. "I see that you have replaced our daughter with Baroness Hartford. You certainly work fast."

Lady Withersworth let out a short scoff. "You and your exaggerations. Do not think that I don't see what you were trying to do here. I am sure you were hoping we would forget you and let you waste the evening away drinking with your friends." She reached out and took the glass her husband was holding, handing it over to one of the other gentlemen, who only received it with a wry smile. "I swear, sometimes it is as if you *want* me to nag you. It was only last week that the healer said you should drink less, yet here I find you doing the exact opposite."

"Dagnabbit woman, one glass won't kill me."

"Oh, I wouldn't be quite so sure about that. But even if does not, I very well might."

The other men gathered around Lord Withersworth gave hearty laughs at that.

The woman's head snapped to them. "Do not act as if you lot are not complicit. If I find myself having to bury my fool of a husband prematurely, then I will track down each of you and ensure you join him. Is that understood?"

"Crystal clear," the man with one glass in each hand said. He looked to be the youngest of the group, even with his dark hair that had plenty of grey streaks in it and the thick mustache on his lip. "I'll have my butler charter a ship to Zovivios soonest possible. I hear they have remarkable beaches."

"You better not have Valda join you on that trip. She knows to prioritise between her husband and her long-time friend."

The man blinked, then turned to his left. "Godwin, you wouldn't happen to have room for one more next time you disappear on one of those escapades of yours, would you?"

The dean of Elystead Tower raised two gloved hands in the air, a dignified smile on his face. "I am afraid that I know better than to try to run from the inevitable, Fitzroy. I suggest you surrender to your fate."

A cough sounded out from Lord Withersworth. "Yes, well, I am sure all but my wife here would be overjoyed to see my untimely demise, but if we could perhaps turn our attention to something *else*." He glanced at Scarlett before eyeing his wife and son for a moment. "Where did Lorena go to? And is there a particular reason you had to come looking for me? I will have you know this was the first and *last* glass I was having tonight."

"Lorena took Lucan to go find Catherine, father," Raymond said.

“Hmph. I presumed as much. But why did the Baroness have to come with you, hmm?”

Scarlett raised a brow at that. He was about as brusque as she remembered.

“I had I feeling you were up to no good, dear husband of mine, leaving me not much choice than to find you.” Lady Withersworth held a wintry smile. “I also knew you would no doubt have assembled up your posse of ‘lounge companions’, and I thought it an excellent opportunity to productively use your time and make some introductions.”

She stepped aside, ushering Scarlett forward a little. “Gentlemen, some of you may know her already, but this is Baroness Scarlett Hartford. She has recently become a good friend of the family and is the one responsible for my husband no longer having to worry himself through endless sleepless nights.”

Scarlett glanced at the woman for a moment. This wasn’t quite what she was expecting, but it wouldn’t hurt to introduce herself. “Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“That one is Lord George Fitzroy, the current High Treasurer and Count of Quickwallow.” Lady Withersworth pointed at the man with two glasses, of which he had now finished one. “The grandfather beside him is Sir Edmund Somerset, a Patron of the Imperial Academy of Arts and Sciences—” A man with thinning white hair at the top and a forehead filled with wrinkles inclined his head. “—and those two are Master Arthur Windermere, a sponsor of the Western Merchant’s Alliance, and Lord Charles Montague, the previous keeper of the Imperial Seal.” Two men around the same age as Lord Withersworth nodded their heads at Scarlett.

Lady Withersworth then gestured towards Godwin. “And of course we have the worst influence on my poor husband among the group, the current Dean of Elystead Tower, Warley Godwin.”

Scarlett looked over them all. It seemed like it was a gathering of very influential men. Most weren’t high nobles, but at least three were True Nobles—counting Lord Withersworth—who held or had held important offices of state. One was also an archmage, and the other two didn’t sound too unimportant either.

Arthur Windermere, a man who was probably in his late sixties but looked in good shape for his age, twirled a thin mustache as he studied Scarlett. “I believe we have actually met before, Baroness. Although it was quite some time ago, so you might not remember. I paid your mansion in Freybrook a visit on some business with your father several years back.”

“I cannot recall that, no.”

The man let out a deep laugh. “My recollections seem to be of a young girl imposing into her father’s office during our business talks because her favorite music box had broken down. You have matured much since then, I see.”

“I...see. I apologize for any discourteous showings I might have made at the time.”

“Oh no, that is quite alright.” He showed a silly smile. “What is the point of childhood if not for one to act childish on occasion?”

“That suggests adults should act as adults, but I am left scratching my head thinking of a time when I’ve seen you conduct yourself as one,” Lord Montague said, and the men laughed as a group.

Lady Withersworth simply shook her head and turned to Scarlett. “When you are wed, Baroness, I recommend you keep a tight leash on your husband so that he does not stray too much. Ittar knows men can be fools at times.”

“What is life without a little tomfoolery, Lila?” one of the men, Sir Somerset, said. This earned him a small glare from Lord Withersworth, who probably didn’t want to rile his wife up further than necessary.

“It is many things, *Sir Somerset*.” Lady Withersworth spoke sternly. “Calm being one of them.”

Scarlett could tell the woman wasn’t actually angry. She seemed accustomed to this group and their interactions with her and her husband. Maybe she even enjoyed this, despite her complaints? Scarlett had to admit that this gathering of men’s behavior fit the image she already had of the Lord and Lady.

One of the group, Lord Fitzroy, cleared his throat and everybody’s attention shifted to him. “To perhaps bring the discussion back to the topic at hand... Lady Withersworth, you said that the Baroness is the one responsible for our esteemed friend here finally getting some good sleep at night, yes? Could it perhaps be that she was the one that resolved that terrible haunting matter in his land he always spoke of?”

“She is indeed.”

The men each shared impressed looks at hearing that. It appeared as if were already aware of Abelard’s mansion.

Dean Godwin, in particular, was studying Scarlett with an inquisitive expression. “It just so happens that I had met with your father several times as well,” the man said, and she felt a slight pressure from his gaze. “In fact, I would even go as far as to have called Castor an acquaintance of mine. He was an impressive mage for his age, if you took all his other duties into account. We had unfortunately not spoken for some years when I heard of his passing, but it was regretful news nonetheless. When we last met, he had told me he had a daughter that held great promise as a mage. I took it as him simply bragging about his child, but if you succeeded in dealing with that old mansion, then it appears as if I should have paid more attention to his words back then.”

Scarlett’s throat tightened as old feelings churned up inside her. Anger, disgust, jealousy. They all slammed into her like a brick wall, and she had to focus to maintain her facade of calm.

She knew exactly where these emotions came from.

“...While I am grateful for the praise, my father was likely not referring to me when he said that,” she pressed out. She was relatively sure she managed to keep an unaffected tone to her

voice. “My sister always showed more promise as a traditional mage than I did, so I believe it was her he was talking about.”

“Truly?” The man raised both eyebrows.

Next to Scarlett, Lady Withersworth was watching her closely. But she didn’t have the time to decipher the reason behind that, as the Dean continued.

“Well, that notwithstanding—” The man clapped his hands together. “It is still an impressive feat, I must say. It is somewhat humbling to admit, but even I had once tried to deal with that cursed place, but I was unsuccessful in my attempts. There are many awful things to be said about Abelard and his actions, but one cannot deny that he was an artificer without peer. Purely his mastery of spatial transportation and gateways is something that most mages today would give their right hand to study.”

He looked at Lord Withersworth. “That reminds me. I had been intending to inquire into whether I could investigate the mansion now that its seals are no longer present.”

Lord Withersworth coughed into his hand, glancing around the room. “Of course, I will consider it, but perhaps there is a better time for this conversation. And there is no need to speak his name out loud. Besides—” He gestured towards Scarlett. “I have learned that the Baroness already took nearly everything of any value from the mansion. She also just so happened to *keep* the keys that activated what was apparently a gateway to the mansion in my own home, so I do not know how much there is to be learned of what is left. None of the people I have hired have yet been able to decipher much.”

Scarlett managed to get a better grip on the emotions that had risen up as she looked at him.

That’s right. She had almost forgotten that she still had the two [Abelard’s Doll Mansion Keys] that activated the portal to the mansion. The man had never asked for them back, so she hadn’t even thought about it after clearing the place. Lord Withersworth *had* basically given her ownership of anything in the mansion, which kind of included the keys, so...

Dean Godwin turned back to Scarlett. “Then perhaps we can have a discussion, Baroness?”

“I am sure we can come to an understanding,” she said. “I have already had several interactions with the Elystead Tower.”

“I had heard as much from Mendenhall. Things have been rather busy while I’ve been gone, it seems.” A slight frown appeared on the man’s brow. “Not all of it good.”

“It is all rather foreboding,” Lord Montague said in a somber tone. But the seriousness quickly dissipated as he patted Godwin on the shoulder with another laugh. “But somehow I doubt even that will be enough to stop you disappearing on another of your little adventures within a month or two. You half-scared one of my servants to death when you simply appeared in my lounge this time without any prior warning of your return. It makes one pity those subordinates of yours, and wonder what exactly it is that you do all the time.”

“I could tell you, if you so wish,” the Dean answered with a friendly expression. “Of course, you would first have to enter into a magical pact to not speak of it with anyone else, like that brother of yours. Say, how is the Dean of Steepmond Tower these days?”

The other man grimaced. “Perhaps not, then. Decades have passed, yet I still have nightmares about dining on nothing but slugs and insects for months on end. I still cannot look at frogs to this day without shivering.”

Scarlett eyed Godwin. Had he turned the man into a *frog* somehow? It *sounded* like something an archmage might be able to do, but at the same time, it sounded too ridiculous.

“Hmph. That is what you get when you break your word,” Lord Withersworth said. “I still say he should have let you remain like that forever. More sense came out of your mouth during that period than the rest of your life combined, if you ask me.”

Scarlett blinked.

Apparently, it *was* true.

Lord Montague shook his head. “Harsh as ever, Withersworth.”

“I speak nothing but the truth.”

Lady Withersworth let out a disbelieving sound at that. “If you speak nothing but the truth, then I have to wonder who you are. You certainly aren’t any husband of mine, I can tell you that much.”

“Woman, tell me one time I have spoken a lie!”

“You said you would not drink and waste away your time tonight.”

“What?! That is an entirely different matter—”

As the couple descended into the type of light bickering that seemed to exemplify their marriage, their son looked on in a mix of amusement and embarrassment for a moment before turning to Scarlett. “You will have to excuse them, Baroness. Mother and Father stopped caring about propriety the moment they retired from most of high society.”

Scarlett held up a hand to signal she didn’t take any offense. “It is quite all right. I have come to realize that this is simply the way they interact.”

Reymond lowered his head to her in gratitude, then looked back at his parents briefly. “I think I will take my leave for now. Both my wife and son will be waiting for me. I hope we meet again, Baroness.”

“So do I.”

The man said his goodbyes to the group of older gentlemen and his parents—who said they would find him again later—before leaving.

As Lady and Lord Withersworth continued arguing—if it could be called that—Dean Godwin returned his attention to Scarlett.

“Baroness, if I may, there is a question I wanted to ask you.”

She looked at him. “Is it related to Abelard’s mansion?”

He shook his head. “No, no. That can be left for another time. What I was curious about now concerns something entirely different.”

“And what is that?”

Suddenly, their surroundings turned quiet. Close by, Lady Withersworth’s mouth still moved as she said something to her husband, but no sound reached the two of them.

Godwin peered at Scarlett with an intense gaze. “I would like to know what connection you have to the Hallowed Cabal.”