

263: Imperial banquets

With only a short time left until the conclave, Scarlett and her companions arrived back at the mansion in the Eastgate district. Raimond and Rosa excused themselves to the bard's quarters for a private chat, while Scarlett immediately began preparations for the evening's event after having informed Whiteley to ready another guest room for Raimond.

Apparently, the priest intended to stay in the capital for a few more days, and since his current accommodations were 'too dreary', he took advantage of Scarlett's hospitality and decided to freeload at her estate. She had briefly considered denying his request, but there might be more things she wanted to discuss with him during his stay.

After completing her preparations, Scarlett and Lady Withersworth departed in a carriage bound for Dawnlight Palace. As they traveled, Scarlett gazed out the window, watching the mansions and affluent buildings of the Eastgate district pass by.

The sun had already mostly set, with the moon casting a dim glow over the buildings of Elystead, and the streets were lit by the soft, occasional light of magical lampposts lining the promenades. They weren't as common in the other districts, other than along the Sunset Walk, but they were powered by a spell that lasted through the night. Scarlett had heard from Allyssa that people were employed specifically to maintain and light these lamps during the darker seasons, which reminded her of similar professions in her own world.

She didn't think she would have minded a job like that as well. Apparently, it paid well, and you didn't have to think too much about the broader happenings in the empire. It sounded a lot less stressful than her current life, that was for sure. She had faced stressful periods back in her old life as well, but comparing those to her current challenges was like comparing apples to oranges.

As for tonight's conclave, Scarlett was uncertain what to expect. She doubted anything major would be revealed or happen, given what she'd learned about the empire's politics. However, with so many influential people gathered in one place, it wouldn't be surprising if *something* noteworthy occurred. The real question was whether it would affect her. She had her own objectives for the evening, unrelated to politics, and wasn't particularly concerned with the gathering's actual purpose.

Right now, she mostly wanted things to stabilise enough so she could return to Freybrook and resume the matters she'd been dealing with, including her unfinished work on the Rising Isle.

“You look a bit pale, dear. Is everything alright?” Lady Withersworth’s voice called out from across the cabin.

Scarlett turned her head to look at the older lady, who, as usual, was more perceptive than one would expect. She had thought she’d hidden her weariness better.

“I am fine,” she replied. “Merely slightly tired after addressing other affairs during the day. But I will make it through the night.”

The effect of Raimond’s magic seemed to be fading, and her headache was worsening slightly, but it wasn’t too bad yet. She just hoped there wouldn’t be any foolish nobles picking a fight with her, as Count Soames had done at the Tyndall ball, testing her patience.

“You shouldn’t tire yourself out so before these gatherings,” Lady Withersworth said in a motherly tone. “That is no way for a proper lady to set her priorities.”

Scarlett shifted her focus to the window. “I am no proper lady.”

A proper lady wouldn’t have such an irritable personality, for one.

A slight, amused laugh came from the older woman. “I’ve noticed, dear. But sometimes, maintaining the appearance of one can act as a good shield. I should know. I did it for decades.”

Scarlett glanced back at her, then returned her attention outside. “I will keep that in mind. Thank you.”

The carriage continued its journey through the city, eventually reaching the Sunset Walk and traveling down its wide thoroughfare towards the bay south of the city. Dawnlight Palace came into view, perched atop the high cliffs of its separate island, its polished bronze-red stone gleaming tenderly against the backdrop of the rising moon. Surrounded by the frozen waters of Rellaria Lake, the palace cut quite the image at this time of day.

There was a line of carriages traveling across the long bridge leading to the palace, and their own carriage slowed to join the queue. Scarlett watched on in silence at all the vehicles in front of them.

Seeing the procession like this, it seemed clear this event was a pretty big one, even if not on the scale of the Elystead Proclamation back in summer. There was also this sense of quiet exhilaration within Scarlett at returning to the palace, likely a remnant of the strange reverence the original seemed to have held for anything related to the imperial family.

Eventually, their carriage reached the end of the bridge, passing under a massive set of gates where armored guards stood stalwartly in the cold.

Fynn and the others had to stay behind at the mansion, leaving Scarlett without anyone to protect her if it came to it. A fact that she wasn't *entirely* at ease with, given how tired she already was. Even if it was unlikely that she'd need protection, she had developed a certain level of paranoia about these things by this point.

But it wasn't as if she could bring a bodyguard into the imperial palace. Not even dukes had that right, much less a mere baroness like herself. The same went for Lady Withersworth, although the woman technically held a slightly higher status since Lord Withersworth had been granted the title of True Noble after his service as the Lord Marshal.

Their carriage entered an extensive square courtyard bounded by thick trees with gold-red leaves that bloomed despite the snow-covered ground beneath. Following the line of other carriages, they came to a halt in front of a massive set of golden stairs leading up to the palace, which loomed above them like a fortress of regal power.

As Scarlett and Lady Withersworth climbed out, a servant in a bronze-gold uniform stepped forward from a line of similarly dressed attendants to the side of the stairs.

"His Imperial Majesty, the gilded sun of the empire and the light who shines upon us all, bids you welcome," the servant said, a middle-aged woman with black hair tied up in an intricate bun.

The greeting wasn't quite as ambitious as when Scarlett was last here, but it seemed each guest still received their own guide. She pitied the servants having to wait out in the cold, though, even if their clothes appeared to be thicker than usual.

A surprised look crossed the servant woman's face as Scarlett extended her pyrokinesis, which she'd been using to keep herself and Lady Withersworth warm after exiting the carriage, to her. Rather than providing an answer to the woman's questioning look, Scarlett simply gestured for her to proceed.

They followed the servant up the golden stairs into the grand entrance hall. It was both vast and ornate, with high ceilings adorned with intricate frescoes. At its end, overlooking most of the space, stood the massive bronze statue of Galrath the Great, the first emperor. Scarlett's gaze remained on it briefly before returning to their guide.

Unlike her previous visit, she actually had a decent grasp of the night's agenda this time. Since they were in Dawnlight Palace, the conclave itself wouldn't just be a simple event. It included a banquet for guests to socialise, where most of the actual

conversations would probably happen, before the 'conclave' itself even began. But at least there wouldn't be a bunch of ceremonies that Scarlett had to learn.

The servant led them out of the entrance hall through several gilded halls adorned with plush carpets and grand tapestries, passing the imposing forms of the Palace Guards in their polished steel armor. Scarlett's attention lingered on some of the guards as they passed, noting the sheathed swords at their hips.

For some reason, she found herself wondering how she would fare in a fight against one of them. The Palace Guards were elites, after all, and would certainly put up a decent fight. When she first arrived in this world, even the weakest among them would no doubt have easily bested her. Now, though...

How many could she take on?

Her eyes happened to meet the steely gaze of one of the guards through their slitted helm, and she felt a slight smile curl at the corners of her lips.

She supposed it depended on a lot of different variables. She worked best with someone like Fynn covering her front, and the guards likely had more experience in actual combat against people. That gave them an advantage. But it was also a question of how ruthless she could be. Pyrokinesis wasn't exactly suitable for holding back.

Not that she ever planned on actually getting into a fight here in the palace. Even then, it was probably best not to underestimate the Palace Guard's capabilities. Things were bound to differ from how they'd been in the game. Besides, there were the Royal Guards and a host of other defences in place to keep in mind as well. Even if a group like the Hallowed Cabal launched an all-out attack on the palace, they'd likely have a hard time completely overwhelming it. The final outcome of such a scenario would hinge on many different factors.

That said, the Cabal did also have people like Veil, whom even the empire's strongest would struggle to handle in the worst-case scenarios. But the empire was lucky that Veil in particular didn't always quite play ball with the Cabal's plans.

Scarlett might have to be mindful of any potential attacks, however, just in case. Even if she found it unlikely tonight, it would probably happen eventually. Although in the game they only tried something like that once, and then it was an infiltration to assassinate the emperor rather than a full-on attack.

Timeline-wise, that should still be some ways away, but it wasn't impossible that it was accelerated just like a lot of other events.

As they reached their destination, they entered a stately hall that was both vast and adorned with elegant chandeliers, golden drapes, and elaborately designed walls that seemed to connect to various different passages and chambers. Countless people already filled the room, their fine attire a blend of rich fabrics and bright colors, with attendants moving about seamlessly between them. Though the occasion was supposed to be a serious and solemn one, many were smiling as they conversed in groups.

Scarlett was surprised to also see knights clad in black-and-gold armor standing watch around the banquet hall.

The Solar Knights were here? She would have thought them too occupied with the current monster attacks, but perhaps there was concern about the event's safety that warranted having some of the empire's strongest knights around.

She wondered if that meant Leon was somewhere around here as well.

The servant woman who'd guided them turned back to them with a curtsy. "Please, enjoy the refreshments here until the proceedings begin."

With that, she left, moving along the edge of the hall and disappearing into a smaller passage.

Lady Withersworth studied Scarlett. "What do you intend to do first now that we're here, Baroness?"

Scarlett continued surveying the large hall for a few moments longer, her gaze sweeping over the gathered guests.

"I have yet to decide," she said, still scanning the crowd.

She was looking for one individual in particular, but she doubted they would join the banquet itself. More likely, they would only be present for the conclave later. That meant she needed to find another way of meeting them.

"Are you going to find Lord Withersworth?" she asked, turning her attention to Lady Withersworth.

The woman waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, he could only hope. I'm sure I will run into him eventually. He is the one determined on entangling himself in all of this political nonsense again, so he can very well manage without seeing me for a while longer. No, I think I will be staying with you for now, dear." A subtle smile showed on her face as she lightly nodded towards a small group of noblewomen clustered by a nearby

table, their curious glances occasionally darting in their direction. “I think this will prove far more entertaining.”

Scarlett turned her attention to the noblewomen, noticing how some of them immediately looked away when her gaze met theirs.

She wondered what the other nobles’ reactions to Lady Withersworth arriving with her were. The woman had once been quite influential within a lot of noble circles, after all, while Scarlett had become somewhat of a social pariah. There was bound to be some speculation about their relationship. Although that was assuming the people here even remembered what she looked like.

Soon, she turned back to Lady Withersworth. “Then where would you like to begin?”

“An old lady like me shouldn’t hog all the excitement from the younger generation. I will leave that decision to you.”

“Very well. Then perhaps we can start over there.” Scarlett gestured towards a table further into the hall, laden with an array of delicacies and relatively devoid of people. She hadn’t had the time to eat much before coming here, and she would appreciate the extra energy.

An amused look crossed Lady Withersworth face. “Not exactly the typical procedure for a noble lady at these events, but I suppose this will send a message of its own. After you, dear.”

They walked over to the table, and Scarlett took a moment to survey the assortment of appetizers, ignoring the occasional glances sent their way. She picked up a delicate pastry, savoring its buttery crust and rich filling, while Lady Withersworth selected a small tart adorned with fresh berries.

“The Imperial chefs always outdo themselves,” the older woman remarked appreciatively. “Though I must say, I have been rather impressed by the chef at your estate as well, Baroness. If I weren’t so fond of you, I might have tried to poach him for my own.”

“If you did, I am afraid I would have to consider you my enemy,” Scarlett replied.

Lady Withersworth covered her mouth as she chuckled lightly. “It’s not often I hear what passes as a joke from you.”

Scarlett picked up another delicacy and tasted it, wondering if that really had been a joke.

Her gaze wandered over to one of the larger entrances to the hall where new guests were arriving. Her attention was drawn to a group of individuals in red robes and masks. Among them, one figure had a particularly distinct golden mask, with onyx-colored hair cascading elegantly over their left shoulder in a sleek tail. Several guests cast curious glances in their direction.

Followers of Ittar, and a deacon.

Raimond had mentioned they would be sending representatives tonight. This must be them. Scarlett wasn't entirely sure which deacon this was, but she had to admit they possessed a certain gravitas.

"So even a deacon will be present tonight," Lady Withersworth said beside her. "It is not often they attend these types of events." The woman's attention turned to Scarlett. "I noticed a priest arrived at the estate earlier today as well. I was not aware you had close connections to the Followers outside of your current collaborations in the relief initiative, Baroness."

Scarlett shook her head slightly. "I do not, in truth. It is only that priest in particular, and calling him a priest may be overly generous."

Lady Withersworth raised an amused eyebrow, curiosity gleaming in her eyes. "Oh? That sounds like a story."

"I can introduce you to him tomorrow, if you wish. Although I must warn you, his personality can be...trying, at times."

"Dear, that describes more than half of those I know."

Scarlett paused briefly.

...That was probably true.

The two of them exchanged a few more words, savoring their food by themselves. After a while, Lady Withersworth scanned the room, her eyes roaming over the growing crowd. Finally, she seemed to spot a group of nobles engaged in animated conversation.

"I think we have allowed the rumors to stew long enough," she said with a mischievous glint in her eye that belied her age. "Now it's time to make our move."

Scarlett felt a mix of apprehension at those words, but nodded as Lady Withersworth began leading her away from their spot and towards that group.

It seemed it was time to *mingle*.