

255: Family reunion...?

Nestled in a small corner of the Hartford mansion's library, surrounded by shelves of myriad books amassed through the generations, Scarlett sat comfortably in an armchair against the wall, a table crowded with books in front of her. A lantern hanging behind her illuminated the corner in a warm light, while a thin pelt over her shoulders provided extra warmth. She languidly studied the texts, occasionally sipping from a cup of tea prepared by Garside.

Her head was weary after a long day. She had spent most of the morning practicing magic and reviewing more of the workload Evelyne was usually in charge of, which was already exhausting. Then, in the afternoon, she'd attended a smaller forum that Count Knottley had called, gathering some of the local nobility and prominent figures to discuss current events.

Overall, the forum hadn't held much relevance for Scarlett in particular. The Count had delivered some speeches, advocating for unity and urging them all to fulfill their responsibilities, as well as pushing them to collaborate to maintain stability within Freybrook and its surrounding region. He had also shared more general information about what was happening around the empire, though Scarlett already knew much of it. As for the situation in her own fief, she'd already confirmed things were in good shape there. There weren't that many monster attacks here in the southwestern part of the empire to begin with at the moment, much less in her lands.

Since the Hartford barony barely had its own retinue—literally consisting only of the guards at the Freybrook mansion and a small unit at Stagmond Keep—Scarlett hadn't bothered engaging much with the other nobles or their representatives when they started discussing defensive organisations. There had been some interest in her from those who had apparently heard of Scarlett buying up a lot of goods and grains, but that was all.

Count Knottley had cast the occasional glance her way, but he'd only approached her at one point to ask about Evelyne's condition. In general, the gathering felt largely pointless for Scarlett, only leaving her more tired than when she arrived from having to skirt around topics. And after it concluded, she hadn't exactly been over the moon about the prospect of returning to the mansion only to resume the paperwork related to the barony's current initiatives — both the parts left over from the morning and what had presumably accumulated during the day.

Technically, the seneschal was supposed to manage most of this work, and he did. But, for some stupid reason, now that Evelyne was unavailable, Scarlett still ended up shouldering more responsibilities than she needed to, and that included keeping track of everything that was happening. Whether this was due to pride or some other stubborn quality of hers, she wasn't quite sure. She just knew that she regretted it.

That's why she had been more than just pleasantly surprised to find, upon her return, that Lady Withersworth had spent the entire day and more familiarising herself with—and subsequently overseeing—the relief efforts and all the business surrounding that. This included even the initiatives Evelyne hadn't fully gotten off the ground yet.

A brief meeting with the woman was all Scarlett needed to feel confident that the details she'd been planning on spending far too much time reviewing herself had already been handled by the woman.

Though she had suspected as much, Lady Withersworth proved to already have extensive experience managing all kinds of ventures. While she hadn't done anything precisely like this before, it seemed like she could easily translate her skills—and probably connections, given enough time—to the task at hand.

And since Scarlett actually trusted the woman's judgement more than her own, she didn't even mind too much that she was giving up most of the reins on the matter.

It also freed up her evening to pursue her own interests, which was a plus. Because she felt drained from the day's activities and had been pretty moody in general these last few days, she had opted to focus on simpler tasks that *didn't* require her to think as much about complicated matters or the current state of the empire.

Although she wasn't sure how good the alternatives she'd chosen actually were.

The books spread out on the table before her varied in topics, but none could really be considered 'light reading'. They included volumes on magical theory and research texts on the Zuverian civilisation, all mixed with the notes Scarlett had collected from the Veiled Library. These notes were either in Zuverian or some other obscure, dead script that she could only decipher due to Thainnith's legacy.

Scarlett was starting to wonder if she hadn't become a workaholic.

She'd been comparing the notes from the Veiled Library with her personal notes about the game to confirm and flesh out the information, as well as identify potential points of interest for the future. The Zuverian texts provided her with some reference material as well as a more updated perspective on the information she was investigating.

As for the tomes on magical theory, Scarlett had gathered them together more as a small experiment. She wanted to see if Thainnith's legacy could help her understand the theory that had previously been so challenging for her. Since it allowed her to read Zuverian script and interpret the symbols they used in their runes and arrays, she'd hoped this knowledge might extend to the modern equivalents and spells.

The simple answer was that it didn't.

The longer answer was that it didn't, kind of.

Not all, but a lot of the symbols used in contemporary magic theory and spells were either derived from or identical to the ones used by the Zuver, so Scarlett *could* actually understand much more of the theory now. Recognizing the meaning of the specific symbols making up a rune helped her grasp its general purpose, which she found intriguing on its own.

However, understanding or recognizing the symbols and runes used in spells didn't equate to knowing how to cast these spells, and that was a gap that the knowledge Scarlett gained from Thainnith's legacy didn't help bridge.

Somewhat disappointing, perhaps, but she couldn't complain simply because she didn't get the 'magic cheat' she'd partly been hoping for. She already had one of those with her pyrokinesis and hydrokinesis skills, and the legacy held significant potential as it was.

After immersing herself in the library for several hours, Scarlett sensed her eyelids growing heavy. With a resigned sigh, she shut her books and neatly stashed her notes in her [Pouch of Holding]. Rubbing her temples, she rose from her seat, the faint throbbing in her head a reminder of the strain overusing Thainnith's legacy seemed to bring.

It wasn't that bad, though.

Despite her weariness, she proceeded to tidy up the remaining books scattered across the table and return them to their respective shelves around the library. Sometimes she had one of the servants do this, but she often preferred doing it herself. There was something relaxing about putting things back in their place.

While shelving a book on the foundational elements of pyromancy, her hand paused as her gaze landed on a partly concealed door wedged between two bookshelves with a small cabinet in front of it. Her eyes lingered on it for a few seconds.

It had been a while since she had visited that place. She'd only bothered going through that door once, when she had recently arrived in this world. Since then, she had mostly thought it best to leave the room alone.

But now, there was a part of her that tugged her forward, urging her to explore its contents more closely.

She walked over and stood in front of the door, studying it for a moment. Leaning forward, she used what strength she had to push the cabinet aside, then reached into her [Pouch of Holding] to pull out a small key that she had once found hidden in her quarters. Using it, she unlocked the door and stepped inside.

The space was unlit, so she used her pyrokinesis to summon small fires that floated overhead, providing just enough light to see. The place resembled a storage room, filled with dusty shelves, chests, and fabric-covered paintings leaning against the walls.

She surveyed the room, a small frown marring her face. The lingering feelings within her made it clear that the original hadn't liked this place.

That wasn't entirely without reason.

She began by following the wall to her right, her finger tracing a dust-covered bookshelf as she glanced at the titles. Most were ledgers or other documents dating back generations.

When the bookshelf ended, she noticed a covered frame on the floor. Using her hydrokinesis to clean her finger, she considered the frame for a few breaths. Then she reached out and removed the fabric covering it.

The painting depicted a middle-aged man with dark red hair and amber eyes, sitting confidently in the office Scarlett called her own, his determined gaze peering forward.

Scarlett's throat tightened slightly, but she kept looking at it for a while before replacing the covering.

She found another covered frame nearby and stepped over to it. Pulling off the fabric, she uncovered a painting of a woman with long brown hair and gentle features, standing in a flower garden and looking over a young Evelyne with a smile.

A surge of revulsion welled up, and Scarlett immediately re-covered the painting.

She was honestly shocked that the original had even allowed that to remain here.

Glancing around, her gaze fell on another frame, this one nearly hidden in the corner behind crates and minor items. For several seconds she simply looked at it, before eventually walking over and carefully moving the obstacles aside.

Standing in front of the frame, she reached out, gripping the fabric at the corner and slowly pulling it away. Beneath, a painting revealed a lone woman seated in front of a hearth with a proud bearing, staring directly at the observer.

The woman bore a striking resemblance to Scarlett, except her hair was black rather than dark red, and her sharp eyes were a light blue. Everything else could almost have been like looking at a copy of Scarlett. Even the way she seemed to look down upon you through the painting was eerily similar to how Scarlett often saw herself in the mirror.

She wasn't sure how long she stood there, regarding the painting, before she finally covered it up again and turned away. Surprisingly, some of the earlier anger had subsided, but she wasn't sure what had replaced it was much better.

As she began making her way to the exit, she paused one last time when she noticed a small chest resting on a counter by one of the walls. Her brow furrowed slightly as she studied it. The chest seemed familiar for some reason, but she didn't recognize it.

After considering it for a moment, she stepped closer and reached out to unlatch the chest, opening it. Inside was a single garnet ring, crafted from thin gold and featuring a deep red stone on its face.

[Hartford Garnet Ring (Unique)]

{Blessed by an unknown power, this ring has been passed down through generations of the Hartford family, often worn by its head. There appears to be a slumbering flame burning within }

Scarlett stared at the ring. She didn't recognize this item at all, but the familiarity it stirred inside her suggested it might have belonged to the original.

If so, then why was it locked up here? The last time she'd visited this room, she was still adjusting to being Scarlett and had left without exploring much because of how the place made her feel. She never imagined there would be an enchanted item here, one worthy of a system description, no less.

Her eyes remained on it for a while longer, then she picked it up, turning it over in her hand. A part of her insisted on putting it back, saying she didn't need it. That she was above it. She silenced that voice and tucked it into a corner as she slid the ring onto her finger.

The Hartford family had produced numerous skilled mages over the years. Scarlett wasn't going to say no to an artifact traditionally worn by the family head.

To her surprise, she couldn't detect any difference with the ring on. It felt like any other enchanted item, establishing a faint magical connection with her and all, but she couldn't discern its actual purpose. The description also didn't help much.

She frowned. She was missing something. Should she ask Garside or Evelyne about it?

...No, she didn't feel much like doing that, frankly.

Her gaze wandered across the room, passing over the covered paintings and dusty shelves. Then she shook her head and moved for the exit.

For now, she'd leave this place and return to her quarters. She needed to get herself to sleep, and that took priority. As for what the ring was for, she would look into that later. She would probably figure something out.