

II Movimentato Valzer

"I thought I had made my opinion clear to all of you, this topic is *not* open for debate."

The lordling in front of me faltered slightly. He hadn't even opened his mouth, but I had already anticipated his question. How could I not have? They all asked the same thing.

He opened his mouth, and his voice was simultaneously prostrate and indignant. "Be reasonable, Lady Sara," he said, trying to be soothing, "What can one dance hurt?"

You, potentially, I thought, meeting his pleading his pleading gaze with an even stare. I'm no great shakes at dancing, but it was the idle chatter that came with dancing, the things casually said in the midst of a waltz that held the greatest risk of harm. I generally only let my acid tongue go at court, but who could say what might happen during a dance?

For this reason, I might say that I avoided dancing for the sake of my partners, but that would be only partly true. I also just didn't want to dance with them. My court reputation preceded me here, and all those who wished a dance with me ultimately wanted to forge an alliance as well. I was popular, but only because I had political power. There was no other reason.

I responded shortly, "Thank you, but no, I do not wish to dance. Goodbye." I returned to a book I had been reading, but kept a part of my attention on the ballroom in front of me. I returned my gaze to my own area and was surprised to see the same lordling still standing where I had dismissed him.

I looked at him coldly, "Was I speaking too quickly for you? My apologies. Go. Away." I made a shooing motion with my hand, in case he hadn't gotten the picture.

He frowned slightly, but didn't move. "Why," he asked, "do you insist on shutting everyone else out at these parties? Why do you even attend if you don't partake?"

I scoffed, "You must be truly naïve if you think these parties are here for entertainment. This is a place for political maneuvers outside of court, a battleground of political intrigue." And as I looked at him, it was clear that he was quite naïve. He had the fresh, newly scrubbed look of a son sent into the city proper to learn the conniving ways of the city nobility, so that he could better counter their tricks later in life. An all-around good practice, to be sure.

Still, he looked unduly shocked. He took a second stock of the room around him and no doubt noticed the secret meetings going on away from the dance floor. He then turned back to me with a slight frown on his face, and inclined his head respectfully. "Thank you," he said softly.

This caught me off guard, for he seemed to be earnest in his thanks. I frowned at him, "Why are you thanking me? I'm just the same as the rest of them; I just go about it a bit differently"

He gave me a strange look, then spoke again. "You're the only one who's been straight and honest with me this entire night. I'm sure the other lords here wouldn't give me the same courtesy, so

thank you.”

I studied him for a moment longer before nodding and glancing back at the rest of the people on the dance floor. “In that case,” I said, “you’re welcome. Now unless there’s something else you need?”

He glanced around the ballroom, a hint of nervousness creeping into his demeanour. “You said these functions are to make political statements?” I nodded, “Then consider one made.” He sat down beside me and grabbed a book, opening it up and reading the first pages.

This shocked me more than anything he had yet done. He was right, of course, he had definitely made a statement. In terms of political maneuvers, however, this was rather risky. I was something of a pariah in the court, and only shrewd manoeuvring had kept me where I was. This young nobody, by making the decision he did, had shown that he lacked the brains necessary to exist on the same plan as I, yet he had also thrown his lot in with me and so I was obliged to try to help him. This could also have advantages for me, if I played my cards right, so I shifted over next to him and, using our books as a wall to the others, I spoke quietly to him.

“Notwithstanding how incredibly stupid you just were by doing this,” I said quickly, “I feel obliged to help you, and if I can increase my own standing in court, all the better. Now, when I finish speaking with you, you are going to leave in an apparent huff and go ask one of those lovely young ladies over there to dance -”

“But they’re all fluff and frippery!” the young lord interrupted, sounding every bit the stuck up, pampered gentleman I knew he was.

I coughed lightly into my sleeve and gave him a reproachful look before continuing. “As I was saying,” I said, “you are going to ask one of those ladies for a dance – preferably as many as you can, though I don’t want to exhaust you on your first time out – and set yourself up as an eligible young man, quite distanced from myself and my bad reputation. You will of course, report back to me at the end of the night, after everyone of import and their spies have left so that I might advise you on how to further advance yourself and so that I might gain some valuable information in the future. Am I understood?”

The young man nodded slowly, a thousand questions clamouring in his eyes. Satisfied I returned to my book. The fellow sat in silence for a few moments before I muttered, “This is the part where you make useless protests and leave in a huff to go ask one of the more accommodating ladies for a dance.”

Jumping slightly, the lordling quickly got to his feet, asking once more for me to reconsider, which I pointedly ignored. He then stormed off in a huff, exactly as I had ordered. I reflected that though he may have been an imbecile, he at least took direction well. Perhaps I really could make this work for me.

Soon he was chatting up the noble lords' daughters, making them giggle and blush. Before long he had singled out one in particular and proffered his hand to her, his body language asking for a dance as clearly as his unheard words. Several other gentry had also taken to the dance floor, and so I took this as my cue to gather up my collection of books and move to a more advantageous position for both seeing and hearing the activity on the dance floor. My movement attracted some attention from those that were new to this particular game, but to the majority I went unnoticed. While other ladies tried to compete for who could take up the most space with their absurd layers of cloth and corset, I contained myself quite handily in a simple one layer silk dress – little more than a slip, really – and glided over to a table positioned almost directly next to the dance floor. Most of the major noble houses had a table positioned just as such, for they had learned that if such a table was not available, I would order the servants to move a table, or, if it came to it, move one myself. A few other country nobles new to the city were sitting at this table, watching others – probably friends of theirs – attempt to dance with and woo the noble ladies. When they saw me, however, they scattered like so much dust, blown off the cover of a book, and I took my seat.

This table really was quite useful for anyone who knew how to use it. From it, entire sentences of conversation could be heard, and body language could easily be read for anyone who was currently dancing. It was like eavesdropping on a conversation, but better because those you were eavesdropping on willingly placed themselves within earshot. Now, to most people, snippets of conversation are of no use without context, and I am no exception to this rule. I gain context, however, from several different places not related to dancing. I can learn things from the general mood of the ballroom, or from things done at earlier that day, or even from gossip I had overheard off the dance floor. Most noble ladies are insatiable rumourmongers and they are generally more accepting of me in their midst than the noblemen whose ranks I have forcibly joined. Through this I had learned that Lady Everett's (Did you see what she was wearing tonight? Shameful.) husband was in the market for an alliance with a leader of another noble house. I had also learned that the most eligible girl at this gala was the daughter of Lady Garne (though did you hear how she comported herself at the banquet last month? How embarrassing). This had given me an idea for a potential alliance, if I could play the long game with this young lord I had managed to pick up. For now, however, I was going to relax and let him build up a healthy relationship with the young heiresses at this dance.

With all the valuable information I gained at my table that night, I was surprised at how much gossip was circling about me. "Did you see how Lord Mordaine's son went up to the Lady Inesias tonight?" That was interesting. I hadn't realised that I was playing host to the progeny of one of the most influential lords at court earlier this evening. I wondered who it might have been.

“Yes, I did, and did you see how she snubbed him off, even after he sat down right next to her?” I nearly choked at that. My bumbling little lordling, so unwise in the ways of courtly manoeuvres, was actually the son of arguably the most powerful man outside of the Lord Regent? I found it difficult to believe, yet here it was, straight from the mouths of two who had no idea I was listening in. This gave an entirely new aspect to what I’d been planning, though not necessarily a bad one. I slowly rose from my table, having heard enough else to make tonight profitable, and made my way up to the viewing balconies.

The balconies were areas for the elite to make plans or watch the lesser nobles go about their games, and I had long ago earned my right to lounge up here, though I still preferred being below as it gave me a better opportunity to learn things. Still, I had the ability, and now the inclination to visit the ranks of the elite, my peers at court.

The entire atmosphere of the ballroom changed as I entered the viewing balconies. All nobility have a certain sense of refinement, but these were the old and elite nobility. They had had a silver spoon buried in their mouths for so long, they could scarce take it out. Lesser nobles had commoner servants, to do the dishes, clean the drapes, and so forth. These lords and ladies had commoner servants as well, but they also had servant among the lesser nobility, waiting at their beck and call in order that they might earn favour with the lord or lady in question, and as such these people had an even more refined air. Not only did they deserve to not lift a finger, their demeanour seemed to say, but you owed it to them to do whatever they wished.

It was amongst such caliber of gentry that I now found myself, and I adjusted my personal presence accordingly. I shifted my dress, making it seem more an elegant single layer, understated and refined, rather than the slip it had seemed down below. I stood up slightly straighter and looked around the room, still standing in the doorway, waiting to be announced. The doorman jumped at my sudden appearance and hastily turned to the rest of the room and called out, “Lady Sara Inesias, of the Southeast Holdings.”

I inclined my head almost imperceptibly and glided into the room. There is a certain art, and a certain style of step, that is necessary to making it seem as if you are moving without actually moving your legs, though it was made markedly easier by the fact that my legs were covered to the floor by my dress. I slid over towards Lord Mordaine, the host of this ball, and inclined my head to him. “Lord Mordaine,” I intoned quietly, “it is a pleasure to see you again. Is that seat next to you occupied?”

Lord Mordaine turned slightly to regard the empty seat next to him. A man in the twilight of his life, he still cut a striking figure amongst the assembled nobility, his greying goatee perfectly trimmed. He returned his attention to me but a moment later, his striking eyes, so dark as to be nearly black,

gleaming. “Evidently it is not, Lady Inesias,” he said, “At least, it is not yet.” I took my cue and sat down next to him, regarding the dancing going on below for a while.

I was the first to break the silence. “Your son,” I began, “is very brash, very stupid, or very smart. I have yet to figure out which.”

Lord Mordaine regarded me, laughter hiding deep in his eyes. “One can hardly blame him, Lady Inesias. You are still considered a fetching lady in the court, even if your acid tongue and cold nature tend to frighten suitors away.” He smiled carefully at me.

I inclined my head mildly. “It is kind of you to say so, but I would think that if anyone would know of my reputation for blunt speech and a cold heart, it would be the son of one of my closest associates. Have you taught your son nothing?” I asked.

Mordaine nodded slowly after my question. “That,” he said softly, “is exactly what I have done. I wish for my son to survive in this world on his own recognizance – or lack thereof – and not on my good will. As such, I have taught him nothing but the most basic political theory and have released him unto the world. This is his first ball, and I am trying to figure out the boy just as you are. On that topic, I will agree that the boy is brash, stupid, or smart – or possibly all three at once – to approach you on his first night. Even without my aid, he will surely have heard of the cold, blunt nature of the Lady Inesias.”

I grinned and turned more towards Lord Mordaine. “Perhaps he is looking for a teacher, then,” I said, “since you seem to have denied him one. I would be only too happy to oblige, if that is the case, though I wonder what kind of effect my teachings might have on his moldable young mind.”

Mordaine nodded his head toward the main ballroom. “Do what you will with him. I have already released him to the wolves; I shouldn’t be surprised if a few of them take him in. But I will admit that I thought this particular wolf,” he said, regarding me, “hunted alone.”

I smiled once again as I stood up. “Oh, you know me, Lord Mordaine,” I said as I approached the doorway back down to the ballroom, “always looking for a new advantage.”

I adjusted my posture and dress once more as I reentered the ballroom, and I went from a striking presence to barely noticeable in the span of a few seconds. This was how I got most of my information; the fact that most people didn’t notice that I was nearby when they divulged their secrets. By making my table near the dance floor routine, I became a prop – just part of the furniture. The same could be said for my habit of reading at galas like these. My absence had no doubt been noticed, though, and would be the subject of more gossip, but for now, the dancing was in full swing, and I knew that it would be at least another hour before I could speak to Mordaine’s son again.

An hour came and went without anything particularly catching my interest, but I soon noticed

that the dancing was beginning to wind down and guests beginning to leave, and so I stood up from my table, collected my books, and walked towards a side hallway, making sure to catch the eye of the young Mordaine as he was saying his goodbyes to a few ladies. He jumped just slightly as I walked past, and hurriedly finished up the rest of his farewells to wait in the side hallway I was headed towards.

I found him waiting nervously shifting from foot to foot as I approached him from behind, and I rapped him smartly on the back of the head. “Stand still!” I ordered, “You will never get anyone to take you seriously if you look as flighty as a hare,” he stopped fidgeting and looked at me. “That’s it,” I said, “now stand up straight, keep your head level, and tilt it down only so much as you need to make eye contact with me. The only time you should make direct eye contact with anyone is when you are both seated, but you should make eye contact like this whenever you speak with someone. It lets your audience know you are interested in what they have to say without guaranteeing a position or revealing emotions.”

He did as I told him and the effect was rather striking; he looked very much like his father. “What was the purpose,” he began, “of having me dance with all those girls? Not that I wouldn’t mind doing it again, but they chattered endlessly to me while we danced, and it grated on my nerves after a while.”

I rapped him on the head again, a much more difficult prospect now that he was standing at his full height. “First off,” I said, “those are not girls, they are ladies, and if anyone else were to hear you call them as such you would lose any credibility you might have gained. Secondly, you would do well to actually listen to that chatter the next time you dance with one of them, as it could contain valuable information. I did not expect you to actually gain any information this evening, tonight was simply intended to set you up as a potential dance partner and bachelor to the eligible ladies of the court. Thirdly, were you planning on telling me at any point that you were Lord Mordaine’s son?”

The question caught him off guard, and his mouth fell open for a moment before he remembered himself and closed it. “How did you -“

“How did I find out that your father was one of the most influential men at court? Part of it was listening to some of that ‘chatter’ you were going on about, and part of it was from the lovely chat I had with him this evening,” the boy’s face paled, and I grinned, “Yes, that’s right. Your father and I had a nice discussion, and neither of us can figure out if you are incredibly smart or incredibly stupid,” I continued, “Why on earth would you seek me out and try to befriend me of all people?”

He looked down at his feet embarrassedly, already forgetting the lesson I had just taught him. “It’s basic political theory,” he said, “find the most powerful person in the room and ingratiate yourself

to them, and everyone agrees that what you lack in personality, you more than make up for in power.”

I laughed aloud at this, the sound ringing through the now empty ballroom. “Well at least they recognise that I have power! Sad to say, however, that I may have been slightly out of your reach beforehand. The political theory you’re thinking of is really more of a metaphor for ingratiating yourself to the most prominent power of the same class as you or one class higher. If the Lord Regent were to have attended this ball, I doubt you would have done the same to him as you did to me. He’s out of your league – just as I am, young man – and you would do well not to take something you read out of a dusty old tome to heart, otherwise you will get yourself into more messes like this.”

He looked up at me again, lifting his eyes from the floor. “What will you do with me, then,” he asked, “now that you know who I am?”

“Don’t be foolish,” I responded shortly, “I don’t have the slightest idea who you are; I don’t even know your first name. I know who you’re related to, and while that may be important to some, I don’t give one whit for familial relations. That railroads you too much, as your father has obviously realised. Now, you’ve thrown your lot in with me, for better or for worse, and I’d like to see this turn out profitably for the both of us. I started out lower in the courts than you, and I can likely gain you some standing locally – what you do with it is up to you. In return, you will provide me with any gossip or other information you might happen to hear at the dances you will be going to. Information for reputation – a fair deal, wouldn’t you say?”

Mordaine’s son eyed me suspiciously. “How do I know that you won’t just abandon me when I cease to be useful again?” he asked.

I laughed again. “Oh, I will,” I said, “but the key is that I will teach you to be useful to me. As long as you learn well, I will have no reason to leave you behind. Congratulations,” I spoke more softly, “you have earned the support of one of the most powerful ladies at court. Let’s see what you can accomplish with it.”