

152: Those close by

Livvi stood in front of the mirror in the washroom of the quarters that had been provided for her, giving herself a final once-over. She had styled her light-brown hair in a bow hanging over her shoulder, like her mother often did, and wore a light, white dress with blue patterns on it. For once, she chose to forgo her glasses. There was no need for them when she was only meeting other people, and they would only further accentuate her already bloodshot eyes.

She had not gotten much sleep.

The previous night had been a horrible ordeal. The chaos, the screams, the blood — it was her first experience in such close proximity to fighting and death, and the sights still lingered in the recesses of her mind. What had occurred was a tragedy and a disaster, not only for the Windgrove duchy and the Tyndalls but for the entire empire. She didn't know how many of the attendees had lost their lives, but even if it was just one person, it was one too many.

And yet, they had decided to proceed with the gathering for the nobles this tomorrow.

She disagreed with that choice. There was nothing wrong with canceling such an event under these circumstances. It felt disrespectful to the victims of the attack to simply pretend it hadn't happened. She understood Duke Tyndall's reasons for proceeding and her father's decision to attend, but she didn't like it.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much she could do about it.

Releasing a tired sigh, she exited the washroom and completed her final preparations before leaving her quarters to meet her family. They were waiting for her in one of the foyers, and together they stepped out into the courtyard and moved to their carriage. As she climbed inside the vehicle and it began to move, her father studied her intently from across the cabin. The healers had tended to his nose the night before, but it still looked redder than usual.

She met his gaze. "Is there something you want to say, father?"

"...You don't have to accompany us, buttercup. These gatherings are mostly pointless, so it would be better for you to stay in your quarters and get more rest."

"But you and Garrin are still attending, aren't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then I'm joining as well." She fixed him with a determined look. "I didn't suffer through what happened yesterday alone. If our family has chosen to attend despite the circumstances, so will I."

Her father grumbled softly but didn't say anything more.

Soon, their carriage arrived at a spacious enclosed area nestled in the heart of a sprawling garden that stretched along the banks of Stockder Lake. The serene ambiance was enhanced

by the presence of enchanted pillars scattered throughout the area, emitting a soft, snug glow that bathed the surroundings in a comforting warmth that didn't fit the season. Tables and patios were meticulously arranged around the garden, awaiting the arrival of more guests.

As the carriage stopped and Livvi stepped out of it, she spotted a decent number of people who were already mingling around the tables and engaging in animated conversations. She recognized several faces but couldn't spot the one person she was hoping to see.

Would Scarlett not be attending after all? The woman's absence felt out of character, considering her usual enthusiasm for events like this. The Tyndall Ball was renowned for attracting influential individuals from across the empire, transcending social castes and enabling new connections to flourish. Livvi herself appreciated the event for the many positive relationships she knew it had formed in the past. That said, she couldn't help but feel uncertain about Scarlett's view on it, considering some of her friend's recent actions. And there was also a difference between the ball and today's gathering.

Where the ball had people from all walks of life present, this morning's venue was exclusively reserved for the empire's aristocracy. It was where some of the nation's most privileged people convened to forge and negotiate new deals that favored them and allowed them to be the ones who benefited the most out of whatever agreements had been struck the night before. She was unlikely to find many of her Guild colleagues here, and while she had acquaintances within these circles, true friendships were scarce.

Guided by the Duke's staff, Livvi and her family moved towards the garden, joining the assembly of nobles. They quickly headed towards one of the first patios they spotted, where some of her father's associates were gathered. Despite the man's reputation as somewhat of a brute who was uninterested in socialising with many of the other high nobles—Livvi knew personally how stubborn he could be when it came to things he disliked—people were often surprised by how sociable he could be when he made the effort.

It was just that he often didn't try.

For a while, Livvi immersed herself in conversations with her brother and father, mingling with the other nobles and acquainting herself with ongoing matters. Every so often, she shifted her gaze towards the area where carriages arrived, noting any new arrivals.

Eventually, she spotted the familiar Hartford crest adorning one of the approaching carriages and soon saw Scarlett and her sister emerge from the vehicle as they made their way towards the venue. She watched as the two walked through the garden, heading in the direction where most of the attendees were gathered. They seemed to stop for a moment, discussing something between themselves.

Livvi turned to her father. "I will take my leave for now," she informed him.

The man's gaze followed the direction she had been looking, spotting Scarlett. His expression furrowed as a short scoff left him, but he still gestured for her to go ahead.

Livvi couldn't help the small smile that wormed itself onto her face. Her father could be adorable at times.

She began making her way towards Scarlett and Evelyne. Both noticed her approach before she reached them, pausing in their conversation.

“Livvi. I see that you are well,” Scarlett greeted her in her typical cool manner.

“I am, yes. It’s good to see that the two of you seem to be fine as well. Hello, Evelyne.” Livvi offered a warm smile to both sisters.

Evelyne returned the smile, although the weariness was evident on her face, mirroring Livvi’s own. “Glad to see you’re all right,” the woman replied.

Livvi studied the two of them for a moment. Now that she was looking closer, she was surprised to see that even Scarlett bore traces of tiredness. Throughout the years they had known each other, ever since they were small, she could probably count on one hand the instances when she had witnessed Scarlett vulnerable in any way.

“Are the two of you really okay after what happened yesterday?” she asked, the concern bleeding through into her voice. “I was stuck helping my father and brother after it was over, so I never had the chance to find you.”

Although she had been fortunate enough to escape any harm because her family had protected her, she had been worried that those she knew wouldn’t be as lucky. The Duke had ensured that everyone who attended the ball received treatment from healers, so most minor injuries were as if they had never existed, but that didn’t mean one would remain unaffected by what happened.

“We exerted some effort during the attack, but we were not seriously injured, if that is what worries you,” Scarlett answered. “A good night of full rest is most likely all it will take to fully recover once we return to Freybrook.”

“That’s a relief.” Livvi nodded her head. “I have been spending most of the time since the attack troubled over other people’s safety, and most of them won’t even be attending this gathering, so I will not have the opportunity to check on them until later.”

Scarlett regarded her with a thoughtful expression, and Livvi couldn’t help but wonder what went through her friend’s mind.

“...I believe I understand your concern,” the woman finally said. “If it puts you at ease, I saw Mister Abraham after the incident, and he appeared mostly unharmed.”

Livvi smiled. “That is reassuring to hear.”

“Pardon me, but Baroness Hartford, was it?” Just then, an older voice broke their conversation as a white-haired gentleman in a black suit approached, lightly supporting himself with a cane. Walking beside him was a middle-aged man with black hair, bearing a resemblance to the older gentleman.

Scarlett turned her attention to them, the woman’s brow creasing together slightly. “...Mister Halewell, if I recall correctly.”

The elderly man smiled. “Quite right, my lady. And this is my son, Laurenz. He is the current holder of the title of Baron Halewell.”

While the older gentleman radiated warmth, his son’s expression was less amiable. He still offered a respectful nod to Scarlett, though. “Baroness Hartford.”

Scarlett greeted him with a nod in return. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Baron Halewell.”

Livvi and Evelyne exchanged looks. It seemed neither of them knew how Scarlett was familiar with this man.

“I said much the same yesterday, but upon seeing you just now, I felt compelled to express my gratitude once more for your assistance, my lady,” the older of the Halewells said. “I imagine my son feels similarly.”

His son didn’t *look* as enthusiastic about the prospect. In fact, he seemed to already know who Scarlett was and appear eager to engage in conversation with her.

A pang of annoyance stirred inside Livvi. She had heard from some of her associates that Scarlett had been shunned in noble circles lately, even by people who were supposed to be the woman’s friends. While Livvi could *understand* why people acted that way—she herself still struggled to fully comprehend Scarlett’s actions during the Proclamation—she felt it was all a bit excessive. But she was also well aware of how prideful people could be.

“Thank you, Baroness, for saving my son and father,” Baron Halewell eventually said. “My father may have already conveyed this to you, but our family does not forget debts. If there is anything we can assist you with, I believe we can come to an agreement.”

“I am certain that we can,” Scarlett replied.

The elder Halewell then shifted his gaze to Livvi and Evelyne. “And who are these fine young ladies?”

“I am Scarlett’s younger sister, Evelyne Hartford.”

“And I am Livvi Knottley.”

The man’s eyebrows rose. “Knottley? Are you perhaps related to Count Knottley?”

“Yes,” Livvi said. “I am his daughter. Do you know him?”

He leaned on his cane and stroked his white beard. “I see. I have had the occasional conversation with him, but I would not say that we are familiar.”

“My father is over there, if you are interested in speaking with him.”

Her father disliked most meetings like this, but this man seemed pleasant enough. He was respectful towards her and Scarlett at least, and it appeared that Scarlett had helped him the previous night.

The man glanced over towards where she gestured, where the Count was. “No, that will be quite all right. I should return to my dear wife instead. I was the one that pulled her along today despite her protests, so the very least I can do is keep her company.”

He looked back at Scarlett, giving her and Evelyne a respectful nod. “Me and my son won’t keep you any longer. I hope we have another opportunity to meet in the near future. Until then, I wish you all the best.”

With that, the elderly gentleman and his son took their leave.

Evelyne turned to observe Livvi and Scarlett for a moment, appearing to contemplate something. After exchanging a glance with her sister, she eventually spoke. “I will go and mingle for a bit. I’ll leave the two of you alone.”

She quickly departed, leaving Livvi suddenly alone with Scarlett.

The two of them locked eyes for a few seconds.

For some reason, Livvi found herself at a loss for what to say. She had been worried about her friend’s well-being after the previous night, but now that she knew Scarlett was safe, her thoughts seemed to come to a halt.

“...Should we head over there?” she asked, pointing towards a nearby area with tables and a beautiful display of flowers arranged in various patterns.

“Very well,” Scarlett answered.

They walked over there, both picking up a glass of chilled wine from one of the tables. Livvi stole a glance at her friend.

“...I’m sorry if I am not the most talkative right now,” she said after a moment. “I think I’m still a bit shaken after what happened.”

Scarlett briefly regarded her and took a sip from her own glass. “That is understandable.”

“It still feels like my mind hasn’t quite processed it all.” Livvi confessed, gazing at the red wine in her hand. “That something so...terrible would just happen out of nowhere. I was talking with an old friend, and then suddenly all of those black portals opened up all around us, and the Tribe of Sin appeared.”

A small shiver ran down her spine as she recalled the memory. Some people, like her father, had reacted almost immediately, but she had still witnessed someone losing their arm only moments after the chaos unfolded.

“It was indeed a terrible event,” Scarlett said.

Livvi studied her, struggling to imagine her friend looking fazed under any circumstances. “Where were you when it happened?”

“I was outside on one of the balconies. At the time, I was conversing with Dame Iyana Webb when we heard the commotion from inside. It was not as sudden of an experience for us as it was for you.”

“But you took part in the fighting, didn’t you? Considering what Baron Halewell and his father said...”

“I did, yes. There were many Tribe members in the room we were in at the time, and I helped to distract them so that those directly engaging in combat could deal with them. My magic is particularly suited for providing support against a large group of adversaries in that fashion.”

“That’s...amazing.” Livvi didn’t know how else to respond to that. She had never seen Scarlett actually engaging in a fight, so hearing this was strange.

“Did you also take part in it?” her friend asked.

Livvi blinked, looking at her. Then her gaze shifted away, in the direction of her father. “You know I’ve never been good at things like that. If it weren’t for the protection of my brother and father, I’m not sure I would still be standing here...”

“Then it is fortunate that they were there to defend you.”

She looked back at Scarlett. “Were you worried?”

The woman studied her for a prolonged moment without answering, and Livvi was starting to regret asking, then Scarlett finally responded.

“I am not sure.”

Livvi’s eyes widened.

“It seems that I am always somewhat uncertain about things when they are related to you,” her friend continued.

Livvi stared at her, momentarily opening her mouth before closing it. Her thoughts wandered. There had been something weighing on her mind for a while now. Whenever she saw Scarlett, she would notice subtle changes. Differences from the old Scarlett she used to know. It had both delighted and saddened her at the same time, for some reason. Most people were surprised at the big changes, but Livvi found herself not being able to ignore the minor details. The way Scarlett would look at her sometimes, or how the woman would seem just slightly more *conscious* of those around her than before. It made Livvi wonder what had caused this shift. What had made her old friend transform like this?

It was difficult to imagine the Scarlett she used to know ever making an admission like the one just now.

“Scarlett... Do you remember what you told me when we were younger? After your mother passed away...?”

The question hung in the air as Scarlett stood there, studying her with a concentrated gaze, as if she could deduce the answer from her face. "I do not," she eventually replied.

Livvi wasn't surprised.

That was strange. She *should* have been shocked. Even with all the other changes, Scarlett should never have forgotten about that. It was the one thing Livvi believed would remain with her friend for life. Yet somehow, it hadn't, and it felt oddly natural.

Was this the cause of that peculiar feeling she had experienced every time she interacted with Scarlett lately?

...What did it mean? Was it bad...or was it good?

"...Is there a problem?" Scarlett asked, bringing Livvi back to the present.

"Oh... Never mind. I'm sorry, I was lost in thought about something... It might not be that important, so please disregard it."

Scarlett observed her for a moment. "Are you certain?"

Livvi hesitated. "Actually..." Her attention was drawn to a figure approaching them from another part of the garden. The person, dressed in an elegant gown and wearing a stony expression, looked like they were staring directly at Scarlett. "W-We can discuss it some other time. I think there is something else we need to address first," she said, pointing towards the person.

It was Marchioness Edita Delmon, Scarlett's future mother-in-law.