

## Confrontation and Catastrophe

Sloane followed the lead guard and the Baron of Lunacy, William Bolton, through the ballroom. Elodie followed behind, but would soon veer off to retrieve the knights. Luckily, Sloane had caught her eye when the guards approached her and warned her off before she got herself involved.

The guards escorted her through the central area she had been in before, the crowd staring as they passed. She saw whispers and fingers pointed in her direction by everyone within eyesight. She turned and looked for Elodie, and saw that she had slipped away. Sloane tried to see if she could see the knights but was unsuccessful.

They walked through another set of doors into a second ballroom that was far smaller than the previous but more ornately decorated. There were pillars that looked as if they had snakes coiled around them reaching to the high ceiling. The room had another stage with a different group of musicians playing a more formal song that seemed almost ritualistic.

A coordinated court dance was happening in the center of the ballroom with at least thirty partners of what seemed to be mainly moon elves and raithe. The dancers whirled and changed partners in a mesmerizing display of graceful coordination in sync with the ebb and flows of the lovely music coming from the string and wind instruments of the band. The flowing fabric of dresses the women wore was an elegant contrast to the formal dress of the men.

Sloane would have loved just to stand and watch, however, she was led around the edge of the room toward where a table was set up on a raised area with five moon elves sitting at it. She took note of the older moon elf, who wore fine clothing of red and gold, sitting in the taller center chair. He seemed to focus directly on her as the group made their way to his table. Wrinkles adorned the dark purple skin on his face and could swear that his grey eyes held nothing except contempt. *Shit.*

They stepped up to the base of the raised area where the count's table was located, and the moon elf guard that was leading the way addressed the count. "My Lord, this *terran* stands accused by Baron Bolton that she has falsely represented herself as nobility and is nothing but a spy."

The count narrowed his eyes, but he turned back and watched the dance. After a moment, he waved his hand and called out, "Captain Lars! Deal with this. I do not have time to deal with it."

The old elf simply disregarded the scene and turned back to observe the choreographed dance that was occurring behind Sloane. A big moon elf that was *built* stepped around from behind the table and in front of them. He narrowed his eyes as he took in her appearance before he gave a dismissive glance at Bolton before resting his gaze back on her.

"Who are you?" The captain asked.

Sloane took a breath, remaining calm and in control of her emotions. *This is simply a misunderstanding by a crazy guy.*

"I am Baroness Sloane." She looked pointedly at the British Buffoon before continuing, "*This man* is clearly insane. He is spouting nonsense before spewing even more about my status. *My* peerage is without question, and I have not only proper documentation to prove it, but I have recognition from the Kingdom of Blightwych."

Sloane quickly looked around, trying to see if any of the knights were within eyesight but didn't see anyone. She also took note that everyone seemed to be deliberately not focusing on the scene.

The captain scoffed. "And if you falsified your documentation or identity to the Blightwych representative? I don't know how they do it there, but here we do more than hand out approval and patents of nobility to some random passerby."

Sloane raised a brow. "Good thing I am not from here then."

"That is apparent," He sneered in reply.

"She is a French spy and clearly an imposter. Nothing about her fabricated story makes sense," Bolton said.

Sloane scowled at the man. "You are seriously crazy. Nothing *you've* said makes any sense. Why are you continuing with this charade?"

The man didn't respond at all and just lifted his head and turned it away from her. Sloane scoffed at the display.

The moon elf guard captain looked at the guards surrounding her. "Take her to the dungeon. Perhaps she will be more forthcoming in a week after she's had time to reflect on her situation."

"Gladly," the raithe woman said with almost a snarl and stepped forward. Sword still in hand.

Sloane looked around. There weren't that many guards nearby. She would not allow herself to be taken, especially if they were going to lock her up for any long period. *Nothing can stop me from looking for Gwyn.* She looked at the baron, who had a smug look on his face. "Are you really going to continue with your lie?"

"Do not speak to me, *spy.*"

*Looks like we're going with plan GTFO a bit earlier than planned.*

"You are really beginning to piss me off. Anyway," she started and lifted her fist and pointed her watch at the guards. "This isn't going to work for me. Do not come closer or you will force me to defend myself."

The guard didn't reply and simply gestured for another guard to grab her. The guard approached with manacles and she redirected her aim toward him. "Last chance."

"Do not resist. You are coming with us," he replied.

Sloane shrugged and triggered her watch and cast a **Flashbang** at the approaching guard. The bolt burst right in front of the man with its trademark flash and accompanying bang of noise. Everyone in the surrounding area screamed and reached up to cover their eyes and ears. In the background, it sounded like one musician broke a string or something because there was a loud screech followed by a snap and shriek of surprise.

Sloane looked behind her and backed away from the guards toward the entrance behind her. The captain was the first to recover and instantly drew his blade from his hip while using his free hand to rub at his eyes.

The Baron yelled out. “A witch! Count Kayser, she uses witchcraft!”

Sloane looked back up to see the count standing beside the table with a cold, hate-filled expression. “You dare use your witchcraft here?”

Sloane raised her brow. “Witchcraft? Where have you been for the past two months? What I’m doing isn’t witchcraft, no matter what this man has told you.”

“What you are doing is *unnatural*. You will tell me the secrets—”

“Lady Sloane!”

Sloane looked back and saw Gisele and Ismeld shoving their way through the crowd. The rest of the knights followed behind, causing the crowd to part. The two women stepped to either side of her and Ismeld called out, “What is the meaning of this?”

Baron Bolton walked up and stood next to the count, and placed his hands on his hips. *I really want to punch that look off of his face. Lunatic.*

Count Kayser looked at his captain and narrowed his eyes at Ismeld. “Lady d’Argin, I presume? This... *woman* assaulted everyone here with *witchcraft*. Unprovoked. Stand aside. My men will be taking her to the dungeon. If you do not, you will all join her.”

“Lady Sloane.” She jerked her head back and looked at the rest of the group. Deryk drew one of his two short swords, flipped it around, and reached it out to her. Sloane smirked as she accepted the blade before turning back around and facing the count.

“I will not allow myself to be taken simply for the *word* of a man who is spouting nonsense. Every story he has told is not true. *Hell*, his fictional setting is two hundred years old.”

She wasn’t sure what she said that finally caused the smug look to fall, but the surprise on Bolton’s face was apparent. The count did not seem fazed at all. “I tire of this distraction upon my ball. Captain, take them all. I will be down to speak with the *terran*, later.”

Ismeld looked back and forth between Sloane and the other knight next to her. “Grenades? Shield? We can use it to funnel them.”

Gisele nodded and drew her sword from her hip. *Too bad she doesn’t have her big sword tonight.* The orkun woman turned and lifted a hand toward the guards on the right and cast her

shield spell. It took but a moment and then there was a roughly three-meter wide glowing shield covering the group's side. *It's grown. She's been working at it.*

The guards jumped back in surprise and several nearby observers cried out again. Count Kayser yelled, "Grab her! That orkun can do witchcraft as well!"

A large group of raithe and moon elf guards, plus the captain, surged forward from their locations around the room. Sloane quickly lifted a palm and cast a slightly weaker **Manabolt** that caught one guard on the breastplate. It exploded and threw the man back, but it didn't kill him. *I need to defend and disable, not kill.*

The other knights drew their blades and paired up, then turned to face the guards approaching from the sides. Screams resounded throughout the hall and people scrambled to get away from the combat. Gisele called out, "Maud, center. Focus on support. Deryk, keep your eyes on her."

Gisele reached into a pouch at her side, and Sloane saw a familiar spherical object. The Knight-Captain caught Sloane's eye and gave her a nod. Sloane called out to the knights, "Three seconds, face away!"

Gisele pulled the small pin and pressed the button. She tossed the grenade underhanded toward a group of three guards and the captain who had positioned themselves between the count and them. The grenade bounced several times and came to a rest at one of the raithe's feet. The man looked down and tapped the grenade with his foot. A few of the smarter guards listened to her and turned away. A second later, the two halves separated, and the **Flashbang** went off.

The guards screamed and covered their faces and ears. Even the guards that chose to abide by her warning to the knights were still surprised and disoriented by the sound. *Should probably train with the knights more. Calling out a strategy is clearly just something you see work well in movies and books.*

The count also cried out and fell back. Sloane prepared the new variant of her main destructive spell and lifted her hand. Three **Manabolts** formed and circled her before she pushed her intent into them and each launched and homed in on three different guards. With a burst on their chests, the explosions satisfyingly threw the guards back against others or, with one elf, a column.

She set up another barrage of **Manabolts**, and let the bolts orbit her, ready to lash out at any who came close. As she did, she felt something shift inside her. The mana within her spell shifted, and the bolts took on a purple hue, almost as if the mana itself had changed. She let a sliver of her intent slip into the spell and her eyes widened at the increased level of control she'd gained. It was as if her changes had created an entirely new spell. *More things to experiment with.*

The guards seemed more hesitant and formed up together, attempting to take safety in numbers. She saw the captain helping the count stand back up, as the older elf shook his head from the disorientation.

The scene settled into a tense stalemate as both groups stared down the other. The knights gathered and were ready to jump into action either in retreat or to press an advantage over the less experienced guardsmen and women. Sloane's spell felt as if it was on a hair trigger and she nearly cast it when she heard a loud, angry voice call out.

"Count Kayser! I believe this has gone on long enough. Perhaps everyone should step away until cooler heads prevail."

Sloane turned her head and saw Guildmaster Romaris standing with a group of eight men behind him. All the telv, raithe, and elves with him were armed and staring down the guards in the room.

The count's eyes narrowed. "Guildmaster Romaris. This does not concern you. This is a situation amongst the nobility," he sneered.

"All I see is a corrupt noble attempting to abuse their authority against an important ally of the Guilds." The Guildmaster looked at Sloane as he and his group came to a stop next to her and the knights. "Baroness," He greeted her with a nod of his head. Next to the shrewd high elf stood Elodie, who was looking at the knights and Sloane with concern in her eyes.

"Nice of you to join the festivities, Guildmaster," Cristole replied cheekily.

"The other areas were such a bore. It seems to be much more lively in—"

"That's enough! Guildmaster, this is not a matter for the Guilds. This imposter and these foreign knights have assaulted my guards."

Sloane looked around, seeing all the guards were back on their feet, even if some looked a bit sore from where she had hit them with her spells.

She looked at the moon elf noble. “Your guards seem fine to me, Lord Kayser. Perhaps, instead of instantly moving to accost someone, speak to them in the future.”

“You have the audacity to blame me? You came into *my* House and attacked *my* guards and attempt to take the moral high ground?”

Sloane considered what he said. *I suppose it looks bad, but the man was out of line as well*, she justified to herself.

“You have nothing to say now?” He said with disdain.

*Time to pull out some bullshit.* Sloane glared at the elf. “Your *man* lied and besmirched my honor. Then you had the gall to not even address the situation yourself? You had your guard threaten to throw not only myself but knights of a Blightwych Order into a dungeon? Based on the word of another? A man I’ve met for all of five minutes? *And you want to speak to me about morals?*”

The captain took a step forward, raising his blade slightly as if ready to signal the guards to attack. Sloane tensed, but then behind her the doors burst open with a loud crash. Another squad of guards rushed in, led by the guard captain she had met before in the courtyard.

“Another squad, be ready,” Cristole warned and both the knights and the guards from the Guild shifted, ready to meet this new threat.

The squad rushed toward them, but were directing themselves toward the Count and not the two groups with Sloane. The Captain raised a brow in her direction but quickly refocused on the noble. “Count Kayser! We have received grave news!”

“Can’t you see we are busy? You should assist here, not whatever it is you are doing.” The count snapped.

“My Lord, I see a typical squabble amongst nobles. This is far more dire,” he replied with some urgency.

“What is it, Captain?” Count Kayser demanded sharply.

Sloane heard more people and guards rushing in from behind. The Captain looked between the approaching people and back to the Count.

“I called everyone of importance that will need to hear this. It’s Valesbeck, my lord.”

“What about it?” A raithe man walking up from behind called out.

“Lord Hirothe, thank you for coming,” the captain said. He turned back and continued, “We just received word from two riders. Valesbeck has been destroyed.”

There were gasps all around and even Sloane couldn’t help but raise a hand to her mouth in surprise.

The count’s eyes widened considerably, and he focused on Captain Jorin, seemingly any thought of what was going on with Sloane forgotten. “What happened?”

The captain looked at a raithe man that she hadn’t caught before. His uniform was ragged and torn. He wore clothing that she had seen on the militia back in Valesbeck. “Beasts, My Lord. Hundreds of wolves, bears, and other monstrous beasts overran the town a week ago! They killed and feasted on the dead. They were larger than any beast I’d ever seen before. Some wolves were even as big as a horse! Five of us set out to bring word, only two of us made it, My Lord.”

The people entering the room moved toward the captain and the count, and soon the area was crowded. Everyone focused on the man as he continued to recount his story. Apprehension filled the air, as more details came out. It seemed the wolves that had caused problems before were just the first wave of trouble and the town hadn’t been able to finish their wall before it was hit. *I hope Tobin and his son made it out.*

The Guildmaster made his way over to Sloane. “You and the knights should slip out while the focus is diverted. I will remain here. Elodie will join you,” He offered softly.

Gisele nodded. “I agree. Let’s go. Slowly, and through the crowd.”

Sloane took one last look at Baron Bolton, the man seemed scared of what he was hearing. *You and I will have a conversation later. I’m going to figure out your story.*



She turned and moved to leave, worried that the attention of the count would find her again.

The group carefully made their way through the people that had started to fill the room. Fear and worry were amongst all the faces. Whispered questions about attacks and war on their lips. As the knights and she got outside, Sloane finally took a deep breath and relaxed. They exited the estate and Sloane caught sight of Stefan off to the side amongst a group of elves speaking loudly. He smirked and winked at her before smoothly joining the group just behind her as they passed.

“Most excellent distraction, My Lady. I look forward to an exciting future as part of your House.” He said with a bit too much excitement in his tone.

“You got what you needed?” She asked.

“I did. I can fill you in on information relevant to you before I pass this on to the Guilds.”

“Let’s get back to the inn, then.”

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Two men sat at a small table in an empty cafe in the central district. Thirdghyll was abuzz with the news of Valesbeck’s destruction. The guard and the count’s personal forces were busy mobilizing and preparing the city. The two men calmly drank tea and spoke of unimportant things as if it were simply any other day.

They most certainly didn’t broach the topic of monsters or beasts that were at that very moment moving toward the city. They didn’t discuss how they expected that same horde to arrive in two weeks.

No, the shadowy men didn’t even focus on the new knowledge their organization had gained of the secret activities of the count or the Guilds, and the possible shadow war that could erupt amongst the factions of the city.

They finished their repast without debating what to do about a certain Baroness and the magic her group had displayed. Nor the new race of people that the count seemed to have an obsession with.

The two men from the Westaren Royal Academy stood up and parted ways without another word. No, it was simply another day.