

Valesbeck

Sloane and the knights reached the village at twilight, the construction had shown no signs of abating. As Ser Gisele led them toward the gate, Sloane noticed just how many armed people there were. Most were telv, with their short pointed ears and more rounded faces. There were also some Loreni, which she remembered were the elf-like races with angular faces, long pointed ears with three different skin tones and she suspected other subtle differences that denoted which particular race they belonged to. A decent amount even had a bluish tone to their skin which amazed her.

Frankly, the armed people couldn't be considered more than simple militia. Most of the militia wore a gambeson and were armed with a spear and wooden shield. A few, who she assumed were officers or squad leaders of some sort, wore chain mail and had the same wooden shield but reinforced with iron. There were two makeshift watch towers that she could see with archers that looked very on edge watching the fields.

Before they even approached the gate, the militiamen were gathering on either side of the road waiting for them. They looked especially twitchy. Sloane heard Ser Ismeld speak to Gisele, "Gisele, something's happened here. They're particularly tense. I suggest a calm, friendly approach."

Gisele slowly nodded, signifying she heard. She took off her helmet and raised her hand in greetings while urging her horse forward, "Good evening! We are looking for lodging for the night. We are just traveling through!"

A grizzled man with purple-toned skin and short ears like a telv stepped forward. He kind of reminded her of a type of fantasy half vampire-half elf race she had seen in various media on earth.

He was also wearing chain mail, but instead of a spear, he had a longsword strapped to his waist and an iron reinforced kite shield on his back that seemed entirely impractical. There was a serious look on his face and he frowned as he gazed over the group, "That's far enough Orkun. Hop down off that horse and let's chat. You may bring one with you." He regarded the group, looking at each member. Sizing them up.

Sloane leaned toward Ser Ernard to her left, “What race is he? Telv?”

Ernard shook his head, “No, he’s a raithe. Similar, just different skin tones and they have fangs.”

Sloane looked back at the raithe, seeing that his eyes had settled on her. A small smirk appeared on his face as if he had made some great decision. Pointing at her, he made his choice, “Her. She can join you.”

Sloane was surprised, “Why me?” she blurted out.

Ser Ernard raised his hand slightly, motioning for her to wait.

The raithe smiled, his fangs gleaming in the dimming sunlight, “because, you definitely look like it would require her to focus more on protecting you than to fight my people or me. I have better things to do than to tussle with an Orkun Knight.”

Ser Gisele looked a bit irritated, “Sir, we are just travelers, my fellow Knights and our charge are weary from a beast ambush just a few hours ago. We simply wish to rest and purchase provisions before heading toward Thirdghyll. There doesn’t need to be any trouble. If you do not wish for us to enter your town, we will simply move on.” She stated as she started to move back toward the group.

The raithe hesitated and seemed to be warring with himself over something. Finally, one of his people leaned forward and whispered in his ear. The man turned to look at the other before giving a slow nod. Seemingly having come to a decision, which, in Sloane’s mind, took far too long, he let out a heavy sigh and looked up at the sky. Grumbling, “Ah screw it.” He whispered something to his man, which had him straighten and take a stance that clearly conveyed that he was ready to take action. Others around him also got the hint and took up a similar stance.

The raithe clapped his hands once, hyping himself up, and then walked toward Ser Gisele. She shifted in her saddle, wary. She looked to Ser Cristole, who had his horse back up a bit, creating distance from any of the spear-wielding militia. Ser Ismeld slowly lowered her hand to her side, ready to take action. The raithe seemed to notice this and looked to Gisele to whom he spoke at a low volume. It required Sloane to strain just to make out what he was saying.

“There’s no need to be like that, lass. Look, I’m Melchior, pleased to meetcha. I have the dubious

honor of being in charge of this here town militia.” He sighed again, Sloane noticing just how tense he was. “Look, my boys? They’re a bit on edge. I only wished for you to come chat so that they could see you don’t mean any trouble.” He looked at his men, then back to Ser Gisele with a severe look, “You don’t mean any trouble. Do you?”

Gisele shook her head, still tense. “We do not.”

“Then, what do you say we start over milady Knight?”

Ser Gisele took a moment before nodding, “Fine, but only because we have some who should have a proper rest tonight. Do you mind telling us what has all of your people on edge and rushing to build a wall?”

Melchior looked around then called out to another raithe standing off to the side, “Cadell! Come here lad, I want you to show them your little trophy.”

The young man ran over and then pulled out a large claw that was almost as big as her hand. Sloane instantly knew what it was from. Ser Gisele let out a slow whistle and then addressed the militia commander. “You were attacked by the wolves too?”

Melchior looked a bit surprised but hid it away quickly, “Yes, about forty of them hit the town last night, they seemed way too coordinated and precise to be simple beasts. Some have suggested that the wolves may have been trained and used to target us. We don’t know how many or what else is out there, but we lost eighty-six people, including children, before we rallied.” He paused, composing himself. “Wait. Hold on, what do you mean when you asked if we had been attacked *too*?” He looked around at us, then answered his own question. “Your people that need ‘rest’. The beast ambush. How many?”

“Seven attacked us, waited until one of my knights went forward, and the other hung back. We were lucky they targeted my people on the wagon instead of the solitary members away from the group. We got lucky,” she repeated, “but it was still a difficult fight. We killed five, the other two ran off. We didn’t see any evidence of more, we had thought we were bringing the news of them to *you*.”

Melchior ran his hand through his hair, his bearing relaxing slightly, “Do you have proof of what you say?”

Ser Cristole tossed him a bag, which Melchior opened and pulled wolf fangs out of. Nodding to himself, he closed the bag and threw it back to Cristole. "Alright," He said in a loud voice, likely for his men's benefit. The previous tension noticeably left his body which had a ripple effect on his men. "I believe ya. Let's get you inside. If you give me a bit of time to get my people organized for the night, I'll meet you at the inn. A round on me for your troubles."

Ser Gisele gave him a nod, "Thank you, sir. We appreciate it. Perhaps we can discuss your issue over ale as well. We may be able to give you some suggestions or insight. As outside observers of course."

Melchior just nodded and turned to another one of his men waving him over, "They're good to head on in. Show them the way to the inn, let Jorne know that they're clear."

Ser Gisele waved the rest of the group forward, and they moved on, slowly heading through the gate. By the time they entered the town proper, the sky was turning dark. The inside of the town was busy, with townsfolk bringing last-minute supplies to the militia and workers outside the wall, while others were boarding up doors. Looks of fear and uncertainty painted across every face Sloane saw. She felt bad for them, those wolves were massive, and having that many get into the city? She could only imagine the chaos that had occurred.

They traveled another ten minutes, slowly weaving through the crowded street that seemed designed to make their trip even longer. Groups of militia moved past them occasionally, some looking to the knights with both envy and hope, as if they thought the knights were there to save them. Once they finally arrived at the inn, Gisele tasked Ismeld and Cristole with stabling the horses and securing the wagon. The rest of them entered the door behind the man Melchior sent.

Sloane was instantly hit with the sounds of loud people and the smell of alcohol. The inside, she noticed, looked like a tavern ripped straight from a fantasy movie. There was a bar that looked like it also served as the front desk for the inn. There was a female high elf behind the counter, who looked up from a book laid on the countertop as they entered.

She was thin and about the same height as Sloane, who was already pretty tall for a woman. Although Sloane supposed she didn't exactly know the average heights for the various species on this world. She squinted her eyes looking at Gisele, she guessed the Okrun was about half a head taller than herself, perhaps using humanity as a standard wasn't a good idea.

With her comparisons complete, she looked back to the... innkeeper? She had light brown hair and a fair complexion, freckles lined her cheeks. Her high cheekbones and narrow jawline gave her face an angular appearance. What drew her in the most however were her eyes, they were an unnaturally vibrant green color. Sloane had a hard time staring at anything else, the uniqueness of them fascinated her. Sloane noted that the woman's lithe features contrasted with the other beings Sloane had seen. Even the elves in her group were of a larger build. *Although maybe actual knights shouldn't be used as a standard either*, she thought with a small chuckle. Sloane realized she let herself get distracted again as the woman spoke to the militiaman and Ser Gisele. Sloane completely missed what was said as she offhandedly wondered—"Thank you Miss Jorne." *wait, that was Jorne? Huh.*

Gisele turned around after finishing up, "Alright, we have rooms for the night, there were only three, however. Two larger rooms and one small, so good news, Sloane, you get your own room for the night. The rest of us will split the other two." Handing keys to Cristole and Sloane, she continued, "First, let's get out of this armor then we get a table and wait for the other two as they get out of their own. We can order their food while we wait. I don't know about you all, but I am hungry."

Seeing as how she didn't have armor on, Sloane elected to grab the table for the group. She found a larger table in the back corner that would accommodate the seven of them. As she sat down, a telv walked over and greeted her with a larger-than-life personality, "Welcome to *The Giggling Bugbear!* You're new around here! What can I get for ya?"

Sloane looked around uncertainly, she didn't have money so she didn't want to just get something under the assumption the knights would provide for her. "Uh, I don't know. I think I will just wait for the moment. Just until my companions come back downstairs."

He gave her a sympathetic look and a sad knowing smile, "Oh dear. Honey, It's okay. I'll get you something. On the house."

Honestly, Sloane thought it a bit condescending and she resisted the urge to lash out. "If you don't mind, I appreciate it..." She drifted off, hoping he would catch the implied question.

"Oh sorry! Where are my manners?" He smoothed out his doublet and then straightened his back. Adopting a dramatic pose he introduced himself, "I'm Jahqin! At your service milady!" He ended with a bow and a flourish. "Lazy songwriter by day, inn waiter by evening, and a

mediocre musician by drunk. I mean night!” He exclaimed with a laugh. Sloane couldn’t help but chuckle at the man’s theatrics and she loved the way he said his name.

“It’s a pleasure Jahqin, I’m Sloane.” She gave him a small bow, with definitely nowhere near the same level of enthusiasm.

“My, my, what an intriguing and serious name you have there Sloane. Where do you hail from?” He seemed genuinely curious, which Sloane liked, but of course, it may have just been an act for the customer. She was bad at telling those types of things.

“I am from far away. Truthfully, I’m looking for someone, my daughter, Gwyn. She and I got separated and I am trying to see if she passed through here in the last day or so?”

He crossed his arms and tapped his chin, “Your daughter? I have to say, I think you and your group are the first travelers I’ve seen pass through town in the last two days. The town has been a bit preoccupied with the attacks that happened last night...Tell you what Sloane, I’ll ask around for you. When will your group leave?”

“Tomorrow I believe is when Ser Gisele wants to depart.”

“Very well! I will see what I can find out for you tonight. Now, let me get you that drink.”