

Explosive Introduction

Sloane followed Cristole into the tavern with Maud right behind her. She was struck by the noise of people talking and yelling even in the early evening hour and the large diversity of people within. There were many telv but she also saw orkun, raithe, and even a few dwarves.

The remaining two knights were sitting at a table next to the side wall of the large room with a hallway leading to the back of the building behind them. Gisele sat with her back to the room, while Deryk sat opposite of her. Sloane smiled as she rushed past Cristiole and put her arms around Gisele.

With a deep voice she whispered, "Hey, how's it goin'? What's a pretty girl like you doing here? You come 'round these parts often?"

Gisele snorted and turned her head. "Really? Sit your rear down."

Sloane laughed as she plopped down into the chair next to the woman. "My *rear*?"

Cristole sat down on the opposite side of Gisele and Sloane looked at the woman before giving him a wink. He just shook his head with a smile, which caused her to laugh more... and get an elbow to the ribs from Gisele. "Sloane..."

Maud giggled as she sat in the chair on the end next to Sloane. "You two are adorable."

Sloane smiled and nudged Gisele with her shoulder. "You hear that, Gisele? We're *adorable*."

Her friend groaned. "You are insufferable."

"Ah, but you love me," she said with another nudge.

"You're in a good mood today, Sloane," Cristole said.

"I am! We found a location for the Center and Elodie, Adaega, and Nemura are finalizing everything for the House."

"That is good. Ernald is almost done selecting your guards?" Gisele asked.

"From what Nemura tells me, yes. I need to get with him soon. I keep getting pulled every which way but I'm glad you guys invited me out."

Deryk pushed a mug toward her. "Here."

"Thanks!" She took a swig of the ale, wincing and trying not to cough because of how strong it was. "Shit, this is strong."

The orkun man shrugged. "It is what I drink."

Cristole laughed. "We don't drink whatever Deryk gets for that reason." The man took a drink of his ale.

She nodded. "It makes sense. That's gonna put hair on my chest."

Cristole started choking until his drink came out of his nose and the table erupted in laughter.

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“Wait, so you’re telling me your gelato is that easy to make?” Maud asked.

Sloane gave Maud a thumbs up, taking another swig of her ale. “Yup! The only problem is it needs to be frozen. Which... is probably a large problem for around here.”

“Yeah. I could see that being an issue. I take it this was a luxury item for your world?” Cristole asked.

“No, it was quite common. There were small businesses that only sold gelato of different flavors and styles. They were quite cheap as well. Uhm, cheap enough so that it was reasonable to assume anyone could afford it, no matter their station in life. We had appliances called freezers that would keep everything inside frozen. So you would freeze your ingredients, work with them, then put them back into the freezer. Almost everyone had one,” she explained.

Maud had wide eyes. “Fascinating. Wait, I bet we can do it now!”

Sloane raised a brow, but Gisele asked the question, “How? We have ice sellers, but those are usually just from the mountains to the cities at the base of them.”

The telv shook her head. “No!” She leaned forward and spoke quietly, “Magic!”

Gisele huffed. “Magic.”

“We haven’t seen magic like that, Maud,” Cristole added.

Which was true, the only magic they’d seen had not been elemental... if Sloane had to classify it. That didn’t mean it wasn’t possible. *I would be surprised if it wasn’t, actually.*

“We could. It seems quite likely a possibility. Fire? Water? Stone? Air? Magic seems rare, despite initial suggestions otherwise, but I do not doubt that there is magic that can manipulate the core elements,” Deryk added.

Sloane groaned and pointed at the man. “First off, yes, I was wrong about the magic thing. I was still trying to figure everything out and got excited by a new discovery. Second, your idea of what constitutes an element is way off.”

Deryk crossed his arms. “How?”

“Well first off–”

A door was forcibly yanked open down the hallway in front of Sloane, and some people entered. Everyone at the table looked at the newcomers as the door slammed shut behind them. Leading the group of six was an orkun woman, one that made Sloane widen her eyes in surprise. *It’s the same woman from across the street.*

The woman had pale green skin, and what looked like rough brown leather and fur clothing. Her tusks were small, really just nubs that jutted a few centimeters above her bottom lip. Her hair was long on the right side and while not quite shaved, short on the left. It made Sloane smile because it was becoming a popular hairstyle back on Earth. *Nice to see people with edgy haircuts here too! Maybe one day...*

She wore what looked like hardened leather armor protecting some of her vital spots, but nothing crazy. The woman did wear a shield on her back and a sword at her hip. As Sloane scrutinized the rest of the group, she noticed that each of them was armed and wore varying

levels of armor. *Mercenaries?* The man to the woman's left was a telv with a scar going down his face. He held a professional demeanor despite his look. The remaining mercenaries were a mixture of telv and orkun men who all looked serious as well.

The woman caught sight of Sloane and the knights and her eyes narrowed, before making her way directly to the table. She came to a stop and scowled at the group.

"Can we help you?" Gisele asked from next to her.

The woman's gaze stopped on Sloane. "Are you Lady Reinhart?"

Sloane furrowed her brows in confusion. "What is it to you?"

The woman seemed to calm herself as she took a quick breath, then repeated. "Are you Lady Reinhart?"

Gisele placed a hand on her wrist but Sloane gave the woman a nod. "I am. Who are you?"

"I am Ressa. We have been... contracted to bring you to pay for your crimes."

Sloane raised a brow and Deryk stood up, his hand moving to his hilt.

The woman raised a brow as she looked up at Deryk. "Try it, Blighter."

That caused everyone to tense up. Sloane looked up at the woman. "What are my supposed crimes?"

"You murdered thirty-one men and women."

Sloane's eyes widened as she realized what the woman was speaking about. The soldiers at the watchtower. *How? The first scouts. They knew our names. The Vlaredians hired mercenaries to find her?* Before she could say something, Gisele spoke, "The soldiers that died were an unfortunate consequence of an act of self-defense. We were simply passing through and were attacked without provocation. The right to protect yourself is as inherent as breathing air."

Wait, there were thirty-two. That means someone survived.

"Someone survived. They reported what you did." *There it is...*

"Then they acknowledged how we were targeted by *multiple* archers, first?" Cristole sneered, tension starting to rise.

Ressa scanned those at the table again as her people spread out slightly. *This is going to come to a fight.*

Sloane felt at her sword, ready to draw it. She channeled mana throughout her body, knowing she would need to act fast. It was just unfortunate that she didn't have her breastplate or her grenades. *This city was supposed to be safe...* Sloane glanced around the tavern and saw a bunch of people watching what was happening, and even more were leaving. It seemed that everyone else also knew what was coming.

"You approached aggressively and did not halt when ordered. You could have retreated after the first arrow, you kept approaching. You could have retreated after another, but you killed a man. Still, the watch commander tried to de-escalate. Instead of attempting to resolve anything, you then used... magic to kill everyone."

“We did not approach aggressively. I personally called out a greeting. I was ignored, and the soldiers instantly went hostile,” Cristole said.

“You were in the middle of an active area of war! What did you think would happen? That you could prance right through the front lines without consequence?”

Sloane took a deep breath, she’d had enough. “We were trying to *avoid* the war! They attacked. First.”

“So that gives you the right to kill them all? I personally spoke with the scout captain. He stated how hostile you were with him. How he had to reluctantly let you go because he was afraid you would all attack. That he hadn’t is probably the only reason he is alive. Just because you have magic, does not mean you may use it without consequence, *Lady* Reinhart. You are a murderer, and you will come with us.”

The knights stood, and Sloane followed them. The mercenaries moved to their blades. Gisele pointed at the woman. “If you think we will willingly come with you, you are out of your mind. Tell your Vlatedian overlords they should train their soldiers better.”

Everything went quickly from there. The orkun woman drew her blade with a quick movement, followed by her people. “They trained us just fine,” the woman said confidently.

Shit.

Sloane moved to draw her blade, and Gisele flipped the table at the orkun woman who raised an arm to protect herself as it smashed into her, forcing a grunt from the mercenary. The telv and two other mercenaries moved forward, lashing out with their blades at Deryk. The man deftly moved backward to avoid the attacks while Cristole moved up to support the man.

The last two moved forward and Maud grabbed a chair and threw it at one of the men, followed by rushing forward and slamming her mace onto the man’s shield. The orkun buckled and went down to one knee, Maud swung her mace to the side, hoping to catch the other mercenary off guard but was blocked by a shield. Gisele moved around Sloane to assist Maud, sword at the ready.

Sloane drew mana and poured it into her hand, raising it to cast a **Flashbang** spell just as the world, for just a moment, lost all sound... and *shattered*.

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Ressa cast her **Fractured World**, creating a mirror-like illusion of everything around them, one filled with cracks and shards. and startled the terran woman from casting her spell. Unfortunately, the knights were not so hampered, and the only reaction she noticed was a twitch from the redhead. She knew she had to incapacitate the woman quickly or her magic would become an issue. The female orkun knight pivoted from where she was helping the red-headed telv and swung at Ressa.

She brought her shield up and blocked the attack then launched into an aggressive series of swings, forcing the knight backward. The woman managed to parry a thrust and then followed up with one of her own. Ressa caught it on her shield, shoved the blade to the side, and kicked out at the woman, catching her in the knee.

“Alexi!”

Her team next to her second pushed forward at the command in her tone, launching into a series of aggressive attacks, allowing Alexi to disengage from his fight with the two men. Alexi rushed over, circling around from behind her, and took over the fight with the orkun woman. She glanced over at the telv mace wielder and her eyes widened in surprise at how the woman somehow held one of her men’s shields and was holding both men off.

The orkun woman moved forward just as Alexi moved to attack, giving Ressa time to focus on the terran that was looking around at Ressa’s spell. *Amateur. Pay attention to your team.*

Ressa raised a hand to cast, but then the terran looked at her and narrowed her eyes. She brought her sword up and the blade *glowed* blue with runes. The woman plunged the sword into her spell and with a flash of blue, the illusion... shattered.

Ressa gasped and then jumped to the side just in time to dodge a crackling purple orb. The magic orb hit the wall behind her and exploded. The sound startled everyone in the tavern and caused the remaining bystanders to rush toward the exit. She turned toward the human and cast **Create Illusion** to form her arrow attack, then immediately used **Alter Conjunction** to solidify the objects. She gestured with her sword and launched the arrows at the terran but a large shimmering wall of red... energy formed in front of the attack and stopped her conjured arrows dead. The arrows fell to the ground in a clatter, and she looked up at the orkun woman in surprise.

The big orkun man to the left kicked out at her man and connected with his chest, sending him tumbling. He then rushed over to assist the woman fighting Alexi who had taken advantage of the woman’s spell-casting to push her further back. The renewed attack from Alexi distracted the woman enough to cause her to drop her shield spell. Taking advantage of the moment, Ressa snarled as she focused on conjuring individual arrows rather than barrages of them, using that to fire at a more steady rate at the terran.

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Sloane grunted as she dove to the side to dodge the magical arrows the woman was conjuring out of thin air. She quickly got up and noticed Cristole fighting two men. She moved forward and swung her sword at the man who was closest to her. The man still managed to get his shield up to block her swing, but the blade glowed and thrummed with the power the runes gave it. The hit was hard and nearly caused her to drop her blade. The man grunted and was forced off balance, she brought her hand up and cast a **Mana Bolt** but the man turned his stumble into a roll and dodged it. Sloane fired another one but the man evaded again. She cried out in frustration and channeled deeper, forming four **Mana Bolts** around her.

She raised her arm to cast, but then her eyes widened as she saw a hand coming at her from the corner of her eye. Sloane tried to block it but then the fist connected with her jaw, pain shot through her face as she felt it *snap*. Her vision blurred, and tears streamed as she fell back, blindly firing the bolts, then she tried ineffectively to cry out as she felt more pain drill through her shoulder.

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Ressa stood up from behind the shattered table. She had managed to get a solid hit on the terran, but the woman's erratic spell-casting forced her to dive behind the table, just in time for three of the bolts to explode against it. That she managed to fire off a conjured arrow that somehow lodged itself into the woman's shoulder was attributed more to luck than intent or skill.

A yell from her left required Ressa to refocus on the fight while the terran staggered backward in a daze. The high elf knight was pushing two of her men back and she had to stop him before they gave him an opening. She used her illusion, alter combination of spells to launch another arrow, this one slamming into the man's side. His look of surprise caused him to almost miss the attack coming from one of her men, but he still managed to stop it. He stumbled backward, reached down, and ripped out the arrow with a yell. She narrowed her eyes, wishing that creating more complicated arrows with barbs or the like wasn't so intensive for her magic.

Ressa was about to cast more when a green glow surrounded the man, then a flare of green erupted from the point her arrow had pierced, and she watched the wound close in front of her eyes. The high elf scowled before launching another attack on her team.

Her eyes widened and she looked to the right and saw the telv woman with glowing green eyes pointing her mace at the high elf. The weapon also emitted a bright green light from an orb set inside of the head. Ressa snarled as she cast her **Conjure Object** spell to send shards of metal at the woman. The woman swore but she yanked up her stolen shield just in time to stop the spell.

This is taking far too long. We need to end this.

She lifted her hand—

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Gisele looked around. Sloane was already hit and she could tell the human had a broken jaw from how loosely it hung. There was an *arrow* sticking out of her, just below the shoulder, and her arm did not seem functional. The woman seemed to be lost as she slowly looked around, it became clear she was all but out of the fight. *She's not a fighter. She wasn't made for this.*

Cristole had been hit but luckily Maud had been able to heal him, but even now the woman was being pushed back by a renewed assault by the two men fighting her. *That woman is proving her worth today.* She glanced and saw that Deryk was busy fighting the skilled telv man.

The fight was too even, and they were outnumbered. With Sloane out of the fight, it left them at a severe disadvantage in terms of magic users now. She and Maud couldn't use their magic in the same way Sloane or this Ressa woman could, and she wished their adversaries weren't so effective at disrupting them. To tilt the odds in their favor, she needed to do the same and give Cristole a break. He was struggling to keep up with the two people, and healed or not,

she saw how the arrow had taken a lot out of him. She raised a hand and cast her **Protective Barrier** spell, separating one of the men from her lover. The man's eyes widened in surprise as he bashed against it ineffectively.

Gisele's head jerked to Ressa and noticed the woman lifting her hand to cast more arrows. Knowing she had to stop her, she rushed the orkun woman, hoping to catch her off guard and interrupt her from casting.

Gisele smashed into the enemy caster, lifting and carrying her forward before slamming the shorter woman into the wall. Gisele's sword fell away but she ignored it and focused on the mercenary. She grabbed the woman and shoved her against the wall again, a satisfying thud as the woman's head snapped back against the wall. As Ressa fell, Gisele punched the woman twice in her side, then kned her in the groin. Ressa threw a left-handed swing that Gisele ducked under and pushed the arm up and out of the way. With a curse, her vision went white as the woman brought her elbow down onto Gisele's face.

Bringing her hands back up, the knight-captain shook her head and looked into the woman's calm-filled eyes. She didn't even see it coming when the woman brought her fist up beneath Gisele's chin. Pain shot through her, but before she could block any follow-up, Ressa grabbed her and headbutted her. Another blossom of pain erupted from her glabella and she stumbled backward as the woman let go of her. She shook her head again and lifted her hands to fight the approaching woman but then a blinding flash exploded right in front of her.

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Sloane was *pissed*. That *bitch* broke her jaw. Ressa was shielding her eyes and trying to move back toward the hallway, after taking Sloane's **Flashbang** to the face. Satisfied she was no longer pummeling Gisele, Sloane took stock of her situation.

Her left arm was limp at her side, and her entire *being* was pain. She knew she couldn't function like that, so she channeled mana throughout her entire body, sighing in relief as she felt the rush of the energy fill her like adrenaline. Her vision tinted blue as the mana vented from her sockets like before, and with some **Focus**, she was able to filter through the hue. The pain she was experiencing lessened into discomfort as she pulled on more mana than she had ever before.

A heartbeat after she'd fired her **Flashbang**, she looked around, seeing where she could best help. Deryk parried a blow from the telv fighting him, moved forward, and managed to get his hands on the man. He lifted him off of the floor and spun before *throwing* the man back into the hallway. The orkun knight caught her eye and nodded, before rushing forward and helping Gisele, pulling her back to safety. Sloane cast two **Flashbangs**, one at the men attacking Maud and one at the men with Cristole. Both groups cried out, but quickly and professionally collapsed together in the hall, the three with shields raising them protectively.

Sloane focused on the orkun woman. Fury roiled inside of her. Ressa was just someone else trying to prevent her from finding Gwyn. Sloane raised her hands and screamed out in pain as she channeled even more mana into herself, knowing she didn't have much longer before she collapsed from her injuries. Ressa's unfocused eyes widened as if she felt Sloane force the mana to coalesce in front of her.

With a glare, Sloane channeled her rage into her **Arcane Barrage**.

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Ressa felt as if the air suddenly got thick, then felt her connection to the blue mana flicker ever so slightly, as it seemed to pull from the surrounding area toward the terran. The feeling strengthened and focused on a single point as the mana all formed into being in front of where Sloane had been standing. She didn't even think, she rushed out her spells one after another, using her spell to first form a thick wall and then another to make it solid. The new wall blocked the hall entirely and she glanced at her people, with her slowly clearing vision. The blurry blob that was Alexi was already pushing himself up from where he had been *thrown* by the orkun knight.

“Move back! Now!”

The first impact on the wall shook the building. Ressa's eyes widened and she conjured another wall, moving backward. More bursts slammed into her walls, and she felt her connection to the first wall drop as it was reduced to rubble. The next series of walls were hit one after another in a crash of noise that evoked the thought of an erupting volcano. She knew then that trying to conjure smaller walls to block individual attacks would be futile and too dangerous.

In fact, it was all she could do to put up more walls before the woman tore them down, knowing that even now the terran was showing a form of restraint. That is if the aftermath of the watchtower was anything to go by.

Ressa hastily raised another wall just as the exterior wall exploded outward and her second shattered. She dropped her sword and shield and raised her hands as she felt the ability to cast **Fracture World** return.

Reality in the hall muffled and then *cracked*. The feeling of her magic strengthening filled her as she settled in to weather the assault. She cast another wall, and not a moment too soon. More explosions sounded as the terran's magic continually slammed into every barrier she erected. She had seen things, her people and she were professionals, and they'd fought in the war. The feeling she felt now was the same helplessness as those in a city under siege. *Is this how the men at the watchtower felt? No. They didn't have a chance. The terran killed them all with a single spell.* She redoubled her efforts, forced more and more mana into her workings, conjuring stone to brace the wall. Her hearing was muffled, dust and debris were everywhere. She felt blood stream from her nose, but she ignored it all as she attempted to hold back the woman's fury.

A final flash and explosion that she barely made out, sounded. She waited. Her people stood, fear on their faces as they hid behind their shields. The orkun without a shield huddled close to one of the others, a telv standing in front of and shielding the vulnerable orkun man with his body.

When she was sure the terran's spell was complete, she looked around.

“Be ready. I am going to drop it.”

She bent down, grabbed her shield and sword, getting into a stance. Ressa took a deep breath, and cast **Conjure Illusion**, letting as many arrows as she could float above her. She then felt her connection to the conjured wall in front of her and used her **Dispell Conjuraton**.

The wall collapsed into a mist of yellow energy, and Ressa squinted as she tried to peer through the darkness, rubble, and dust; seeing nothing. Her men moved forward warily, eyes darting, searching for the enemy.

“They’re gone,” Ressa said with a sigh. Exhaustion from using a prodigious amount of magic sat at the edge of her perception. She knew as soon as the battle fervor wore off, she would sleep like the dead and awake hungrier than normal.

“Ressa, we should go.”

The terran’s magic was even stronger than she had imagined, but she was no fighter. If it wasn’t for the knights protecting her, Ressa would have easily captured her. Ressa may have surprised the woman with her magic, but she knew that even if the woman had some idea of her capabilities now, Ressa’s ability to fight was better. She reflected on the fight and what could have been done differently. What *they* could have done differently. They had outnumbered the knights and still, they hadn’t been able to gain a decisive advantage. *We underestimated these knights... They’re veterans as well.*

“*Commander.*”

Ressa was startled from her thoughts and looked at Alexi.

“We need to go, guards will be here soon.”

Ressa nodded and took a last glance at the tavern. *Next time.*

She looked at her team. “Let’s go. We need to lay low. We will have more opportunities soon.”