

## **Your Grievances Are Of No Concern**

”Relax and breathe. You’re tense, now. You were much calmer when you were distracted by your thoughts.”

Sloane glared at Ismeld. “I am not tense. I am... nervous. There is a difference.”

The woman shrugged. “If we have to go bursting out of the wagon to fight off people, you want to do so as relaxed and less wound up as possible. Breathe. Can you hear what they’re saying?”

Sloane put her head closer to the door, cupping her hand over her ear. After a moment of only hearing muffled voices, she pulled back and shook her head. “Nope. At least no one is raising their voice. That’s a good sign, right?”

Ismeld nodded and went back to cleaning and oiling her sword. The soft glow from the runes that Sloane had engraved into the blade reflected off of the woman’s gauntlets.

“Should you be doing that right now?” Sloane asked her.

The high-elven woman simply shrugged. “We will hear if things get to a point where we are needed.”

Sloane sighed deeply then sat back. She had just managed to relax when a light knock came at the door and Stefan poked his head in the door. He cleared his throat and glanced toward the front. “Miladies, if you could spare a moment to speak with the captain of this checkpoint.”

Sloane smiled. “Certainly, Guardsman Stranca.”

She shifted in her breastplate a bit, adjusted her cloak’s hood onto her head, and then exited the wagon. Sloane squinted into the sunlight as she moved out of the way to allow Ismeld to descend as well. She nodded at Nemura who stood next to the entrance. The woman smirked and returned the nod. That smirk alone eased a lot of her tension. *Nervousness, not tension.*

They followed Stefan to the front where Gisele was standing with Deryk and Ernard. She glanced around, catching Stefan's eye who nodded behind them. She quickly glanced back and saw Cristole and Maud standing near the third wagon with the orkun alchemist, Rel, and her crossbow.

In front of Gisele were seven armored men, but were clearly equipped to be light and quick. She noticed horses were tied to a wooden hitching post that had been set up to the side of the makeshift barricade the men had made. Next to the horses were another four men who were also armed. It seemed the majority of the soldiers were orkun, but there were some telv as well.

Every fantasy stereotype that she had seen didn't prepare her for how professional and... normal the orc-like orkun seemed. She had thought Gisele and Deryk were mainly different due to being from a predominantly elf nation. The imperials wore a mail hauberk, conical steel cap, and were equipped with a shield and spear. Seeing soldiers from a nation built around the orkun culture wear what could have fit in a European military from a similar era was interesting. The more she saw, the less threatened she felt. *The only thing to worry about at this point is whether any of them could reasonably get away to call reinforcements.*

That... was not something the Sloane of Earth would have ever even considered worrying about. *Oh, how things change.*

"Ser Gisele," she said with a nod to the woman.

"Lady Reinhart, thank you for joining us. Captain Mor'rek and I were just discussing our business," she said with a quirked brow.

"Ah yes." She turned toward the man standing in front of Gisele and tilted her head at him. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Captain. What can I do to alleviate any concerns you may have?"

"We are simply inquiring as to your purpose in this area, milady. We do not wish to hold you longer than necessary," he said, with a hesitant glance toward Gisele.

"So you *do* wish to waylay us? For what purpose?"

"What is your business in the Sovereign Cities land, Milady?"

“That is none of your concern, Captain. However, in the interest of transparency, we are simply traveling through. I have business in Avira before we return to Blightwych. The events of the past season have been a bit much for my constitution.”

“Surely, you do not plan to reach Avira before wintering?” He looked round them at the caravan. “I do not believe you will make it in time.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Of course, we would not make Avira by land before winter, Captain. Do you believe me a liar? We *will* make it to Rosale, however. Our ship will be there awaiting us.”

“So you have no business within the Sovereign Cities?”

“I believe I have answered that question, Captain. The Sovereigns are an acquired taste, one that I do not wish to partake in.”

One of his men snorted from behind and mumbled something to the man next to him, who chuckled.

Sloane tilted her head and scrutinized the two men. “Is something I said funny, Sers?”

The first man shuffled in place. “Not a ser, Milady.”

She raised a brow, internally laughing at the situation. “Oh? So you must be a Lady. Surely. There is no other reason you would believe it your place to interject into our conversation.”

“Uh... Yes–No... What?” The man next to him jabbed him with his elbow and he shut up.

The captain glared at the two before turning back to Sloane. “My apologies, Milady. I have one more question. Could you lower your hood?”

Sloane slowly turned her head from the two chucklers and regarded Captain Mor’rek. “Excuse me?”

“We have also been asked to look for certain individuals. Could you please lower your hood?”

Ismeld stepped forward. “Captain Mor’rek. My cousin here, Baroness Reinhart, has a delicate constitution. It is quite chilly out here. Now, would you like to check *my* identity? I am Lady Ismeld d’Argin of Blightwych. I am fully aware of why the empire is here. Your grievances are of no concern to me.”

The man’s eyes widened slightly. “My Lady—”

“What is my concern, is that you are hindering our ability to reach our destination before we are caught in the middle of a conflict we are not party to. I do believe Ser Gisele has shown you all of our documents that speak to who we are. That should be all you require. Anything else is simply criminal. Are you bandits, Captain? Or are you professionals from the Empire?” Sloane asked.

Captain Mor’rek stood straighter. “We are professionals. I am simply following orders, Milady.”

“Many great atrocities were the result of men simply following orders, Captain. As my cousin said, Blightwych is not a belligerent in this conflict. I have nothing against you personally; however, we will not be deterred.”

The captain sighed and looked between his men who stood lazily awaiting his word, then back toward the knights. Sloane scanned the four with her and saw all were at the ready. Nemura and Stefan stood next to the wagons behind her, also in a professional stance. *Nemura’s looking intimidating as usual.*

“Fine. You may go.”

Sloane nodded. “Thank you, Captain.” She spun on her heel and returned to the wagon without a glance behind. She heard the quiet chuckle coming from Nemura as she walked by.

*I think I am getting the hang of this noble shit.*

\* \* \*

Sloane groaned. After leaving the checkpoint, everything had been going smoothly. That is until she had sent Tiberius up to scout ahead. The falcon had quickly seen something that they hadn't seen previously. Standing on a hill that overlooked the road was a wooden watchtower about seven to eight meters tall. Below the hill on the opposite side of the road looked like a traveler's area for rest and camping. The area had a small stone wall that surrounded it, which seemed more like something to deter wildlife than anything defensible. *The tower was likely built there deliberately.*

Around the tower were a small fenceline and a storage overhang, likely to just keep anything under it relatively dry in the rain. There was a camp set up next to it with tents and several cooking fires going. Some men were

About half a kilometer away from the rest area and the road was the forest they sought to go around. With her **Golem Sight**, Tiberius was able to show her where trees had been cut down. Fresh logs and an area where men had cut planks out of some were still able to be seen. *The tower is clearly new and a rushed job.*

The line of sight for the tower allowed it to see fairly far down the road around the forest and then to the east along the northern border of the tree line. Its vantage point would allow the soldiers stationed there the ability to have ample forewarning of any approaching forces. *Good spot to put a frontier fort.* She had her falcon take note of the number of soldiers and some basic positioning of their patrols and guards while he was overhead. One thing she saw was surprising.

When Tiberius turned back, she dropped her **Sight** and noticed Stefan staring at her.

She put her hand up to her cheek. "What? Is there something on my face?"

The man snorted. "No. Your eyes are eerie when you use that magic. What did you see?"

"One sec." She lifted slightly on the bench and looked around, seeing Gisele on her horse alongside the second wagon. "*Gisele! Come here, please!*" she called out.

Gisele had her horse catch up at a trot and slowed as she reached them. "Welcome back. You found something?"

Sloane nodded. "Up ahead at the next traveler's rest area. There's a watchtower and thirty-two soldiers. Six archers at the top of the tower, twelve in groups of three patrolling. Last

fourteen are working on building up the camp and the area, including what seem to be support functions,” she explained.

Gisele tapped a finger as she held the reins of her horse. “We should be able to get by them. We just let them know the previous captain let us pass. Was there anything else of note?”

She smiled. “Yes, there is no one watching the road in the direction we are coming from.”

“So, they aren’t expecting to stop people from behind their area necessarily. That could be good news. Perhaps they must simply stop anyone from arriving and watch for retaliatory forces. If true, it makes our approach easier,” Stefan said a bit loudly so that Gisele could hear him from next to Sloane.

Gisele nodded sagely. “That is the ideal outcome. We should prepare for the worst, however. Sloane, I believe you should be out here ready, this time. If it turns to hostilities, I want you to—what was the phrase you said?”

Sloane tilted her head. “Uh, shock and awe?”

Gisele snapped her finger. “That is it. I want you to pound them into submission. From what Ismeld tells me, you held off a lot more people than this with just the two of you. Don’t hold back.”

“Why does everyone tell me to not hold back?”

Stefan chuckled. “You are not a fighter, Sloane. Despite your apparent propensity for overwhelming attacks.”

“I... resemble that remark.”

“We know you do, Sloane. But you also get inside your own head. If it comes down to it, always do what you need to in order to keep your people safe,” Gisele said.

Sloane nodded. “Fine. I will.”

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The caravan came within sight of the watchtower within the next couple of hours. Seeing something that she had seen through the sensory gems installed into Tiberius was always interesting. It was almost like when you got your phone out to video a concert or something, but then looked away from the screen to see it naturally. That feeling that it just felt... *right*.

As expected, the number of people looking their way was... zero. They were about fifty meters to the area when the sound of the wagons and horses caught the attention of one of the archers.

*“Troops from behind! Knights!”*

*“Peace, friends! We are just passing through!”* Cristole yelled out from in front.

What happened next was *chaos*. Soldiers from the area all came rushing back toward the tower and those up all drew bows and aimed down at the group. The soldiers from the camp formed up in their chainmail armor along with their spears and shields. All yelling at each other in a completely disorganized way.

Cristole backed up and called out behind him. *“Shields! Gisele! Get up here!”*

The knights rushed to get in front of the caravan and brought out their shields. Stefan grabbed the large one from the back of the bench and set it up in front of himself while Sloane brought out the buckler from behind her. She wasn't sure what was going on, so she turned to Stefan. *“Why aren't they listening?!”*

*“They were surprised! I don't know what has them on edge, but we need to stop this now!”*

Sloane nodded and stood up, holding her buckler in front of her, then held her other hand up to her mouth and yelled. *“Stop! We don't want to fight!”*

*“Form up! They want to fight!”*

*“That's not what I said!”*

The men formed up then an orkun man came rushing out of the tower. *“Hold! Hold!”*

Sloane took a deep breath and sat down. She heard a twang, then at the corner of her eye, an arrow came flying toward them. Stefan shoved his shield up and the arrow slammed into it with a thud. Her eyes went wide. *“They shot at us!”*

The yelling started on both sides, and Sloane could barely hear what was said on the other side except snippets in between the knights' yelling.

*“Shields up!”*

*“I said hold!”*

*“Maud! Form up!”*

*“Loose!”*

*“Arrows! Shields!”*

*“No! Hold!”*

Six arrows went flying, each aimed at a different person, and yells from the soldiers in front of her told her that they were not backing down. Four of the arrows missed their targets, the last two hit the shields of Ismeld and Deryk. Suddenly she heard another, louder twang that came from behind her and a bolt went flying and hit one of the archers. The man twisted and then fell over the side of the tower, bouncing off of the side as he tumbled before landing on top of a soldier who was standing below.

The chaos went from bad... to worse. The soldiers around the man who was yelling to hold remained where they were but soldiers returning from patrol came running from the side and charged at the caravan, shouting as they did. Six soldiers came from the side and Sloane knew it was time to stop this mess. She stood up and channeled some mana, and then fire off a **Flashbang** at the charging men.

The men cried out but were stopped.

*“I said, stop!”* Sloane yelled as loudly as she could.

*“Sloane! Get down!”*



Stefan yanked her back down to the bench and behind his shield just as more arrows hit it. Her buckler fell away as she lost her grip on it. She moved to get it and saw another man grab a javelin and pull his arm back to throw. He took a step forward, and a bolt appeared in his chest.

Gisele yelled for Rel to stop firing, but that was it.

The man who had formerly tried to halt his men must have changed his mind after a second soldier was hit by a crossbow bolt. He yelled and the men brought up their shields and started to move forward, cautious of the mounted knights.

Gisele looked at Sloane with a helpless expression on her face. Sloane called out to her, “*Do we fall back?*”

The orkun woman ducked under an arrow as soldiers on the ground started taking potshots from a distance of just over half a football field. Another arrow caught Ernard’s horse just in between the armor, causing it to rear up and cry out in pain. The sun elf nearly managed to hold on but then the horse came down hard and Ernard fell from his saddle. The man managed to roll out of the way from another arrow and then hopped up, seemingly alright.

“*Shit! That’s it. This ends now!*” Sloane yelled.

Stefan looked at her with wide eyes. “*What are you doing?!*”

Sloane ignored the raithe as she stood up and channeled mana. Sloane had made a new spell specifically for grenades, but that first attempt at using it inside of the inn’s tavern area was... pitiful. She knew that she had looked at it incorrectly, and attempted to change it to fit a medium it was never meant for.

The spell wasn’t meant to be contained in a small grenade, it was meant to be fired. It wasn’t the type of explosive spell she had needed. That failure had helped her realize that there were different types of spells. She focused on the ones more relevant to her currently.

With her new theory of a system-like framework to mana, she had started thinking of her spells in similar ways. More and more, it seemed to just *fit*. There were **Sustained** spells that also gave passive effects. These fell into their own categories like **Knowledge** or **Utility**. Which for her, meant her **Runic Knowledge**, **Golem Sight**, or like Ismeld’s **Arcane Control**. These seemed to always give her an innate ability, but then there was an increased

effect if she was focusing on them. The effect provided added benefits but it seemed to mentally drain her as the spell was sustained.

Then there were the active spells. Of these, her **Mana Bolt** and **Arcane Barrage** were **Missile** type spells, while her **Flashbang** was a **Utility** one. While she was sure there were more, another type she had learned... was **Artillery**.

Sloane felt the mana churn in her core as she pulled more and more into her, pushing it into her spell. She raised her hand at a ninety-degree angle next to her and pulled her mana into an orb. She then *Altered* the **Artillery** spell the way she wanted and *threw* it, or rather, she simply performed the motion. A blob-like orb the size of a basketball did not need to be physically manipulated as it launched into an arc high above everyone.

All of the yelling and movement halted as everyone gaped up at the large pulsing purple blob of a ball. Impossibly, the spell seemed to speed up as it reached the apex. That momentum continued to increase until it burst straight through the wall of the watchtower. A moment later, the **Arcane Explosion** went off, and any remaining noise in the area ceased.

The resulting blast was centered on the tower, which bore the brunt of the force. That log structure did nothing to save the men in the vicinity. In fact, it barely did enough to protect the caravan. Gisele hastily put up the largest shield Sloane had seen her do yet, and just in time as the dust and dirt from the blast slammed into the wall of red energy. The caravan seemed to enter a wind tunnel as the shield directed all of the force and dirt around the wagon train almost perfectly.

She wasn't sure how long it took, but eventually, the air and the area calmed. The dust settled, and the result of the blast became apparent.

The tower was no longer there. Well, the pieces were simply there... and there... and a bit over there. The camp was gone, the fabric of the tents simply disintegrated. What she didn't see immediately were people. It took Maud gasping and Sloane following her eyesight to see the first body. They were buried in dirt and some... weren't fully there.

Sloane froze as she took in the scene.

She remembered holding her breath. She didn't remember when she finally breathed again. She didn't remember when she closed her eyes.

When she finally opened them, it was dark. The caravan was moving along a road with the only light coming from lanterns swinging from the wagon. They slowly passed the forest to their left, and Sloane's breath caught as she realized Gisele drove the wagon next to her. She felt something on her shoulder and realized then that she was crammed into the center of the bench. A bundle of red hair and soggy fabric on her shoulder was the only way she could tell Maud was there asleep and drooling on her shoulder.

"Gisele?"

"Shh. It's late. We need to get as far away from the area as possible."

"What happened?"

"You went into shock. I—I am sorry. I pushed you too hard," she whispered.

"Would they have stopped before attacking us?"

"No. They were panicked by something, and their archers took their own initiative. Then especially not after Rel also panicked. They may have fired first, but we killed first. There was no turning back from there. We would have ended up dead or as prisoners."

Sloane took a deep breath. "Then I did the right thing."

"You did the *best* you could do under the circumstances. That's all I can ask. Right? Wrong? It's best if we do not focus on it. The world is not black and white, and it is not nearly as civilized as your world sounds."

Sloane tried to nod, but couldn't move without bouncing Maud's head around. She felt a pit in her stomach start to form.

"Gisele?"

"Yes, Sloane?"

"If that was the *best* option, why does it feel so bad?"

"You are not used to this life. You've never killed before coming here. That you are managing so well is a testament to yourself. There will be more situations like this in the future; that is certain. You will not always pick the correct option, but you must choose *something*."

“I don’t think that’s it. I think—I am struggling to see the Sloane that I was, with the Sloane that I’ve become. My daughter is out there. If I have to kill someone to get to her, I will. I just... I never thought it would be this easy to do it, or this difficult to rectify my actions with my sense of self. I look in the mirror and I don’t recognize myself, Gisele.”

“You’re a strong woman, Sloane. You have more tenacity and perseverance than anyone else I know. I wish I could say that it gets easier. It won’t. I don’t mean to be blunt, but you need to figure that out. You have persistently been able to act in the moment. It’s these moments afterward that are going to get you or someone else killed.”

Sloane leaned her head back against the wagon. “You’re right. I’m sorry, Gisele.”

“Don’t tell me sorry, Sloane. That’s something you need to fix within yourself. This didn’t happen in the inn, or as we were escaping the city. Why not? What are you doing, feeling, or thinking differently, that is causing this reaction? Don’t tell me, but that’s what you need to figure out.”

Sloane closed her eyes. *What is it? I didn’t freeze in the city. I had a reaction after the thugs that attacked me in the alley, and now this. Why?*

She sat and tore through her thoughts and emotions. Struggling to figure out why she felt—*Guilt. I feel guilty for killing them so... easily.*

She turned her head slightly, looking at the bundle of hair that was shifting to a more comfortable position. Sloane looked at Gisele from the corner of her eye, seeing the woman smirk as she watched Cristole ride ahead of them. *I shouldn’t feel guilty about that. My actions are keeping them safe. I am the same woman I was before. Guilt won’t help me find Gwyn. I swore to myself that I would turn this world upside down if I had to.*

*No more. I am coming, Gwyn. It’s time I stopped standing in my own way from doing what needs to be done.*

Sloane felt determined for a moment. But that feeling passed quickly because then she felt something she didn’t want to feel at that juncture of deep introspection.

She squirmed. “Gisele?”

“Yes? Did you figure it out?”

“Yes... But...” Sloane started, before coughing slightly.

“I can’t move, and I have to pee.”

Gisele let out a deep sigh.