

Bearer of Bad News

Returning to the inn and retrieving those that wished to attend had gone quicker than suspected. Ernard had made more inroads toward his decision to stay when he spoke to Sloane and stated that he would guard the other members of her House to allow Stefan to join. Elodie had taken advantage of that and planned a sightseeing trip with all of the House members. She said they would take time to scout out several locations for the Center so that it would be easier and quicker for Sloane to review and approve.

They made their way through the city in two fairly large carriages the moon elf Cerulean had procured. The inside of the carriage was fairly luxurious and had a wraparound bench that was tufted with a soft burgundy-colored fabric. The man in question sat across from her, while Stefan sat to her right, and Nemura sat next to him facing the door. The carriage following them held the knights and Tiberius—who she had kept hidden from Cerulean up until then.

“This could go any number of ways. General Irileth should be within the Hall. I just have to gain a meeting with them,” Cerulean said.

The man was dressed in a fine, all-black outfit that was pretty similar to the one Giallo had worn. His cerulean accented hat complimented the look quite well. His nervous demeanor, however, was nothing like the man she had met in Thirdghyll.

“You know, your bakery isn’t that subtle. It all but screams ‘this business is a front’. I will be supremely surprised if they don’t realize who you are. I will take the lead first, that way if they somehow do *not* know who you are, you can maintain your cover,” she said.

Cerulean leaned back. “I would appreciate that, but how will you gain an audience?”

Sloane smirked and looked at Stefan. “We’ll do it live.”

Stefan shifted uncomfortably where he sat. “What does that mean?”

“Don’t you worry. I’m just going to be the bearer of bad news.”

Nemura turned and looked out the window. “We’re here.”

Sloane smiled. “Let’s do this. Time for me to earn my keep, and pretend whatever I do is normal.” She looked at Nemura. “Please watch me, I don’t think this will tire me out, but just in case, catch me if I fall over?”

The large woman tilted her head. “What is ‘this’?”

Sloane smiled and channeled her mana to her eyes. Focusing on the blue mana, she felt the energy fill, then exhaust from her eyes in just the way she wanted. She looked at a mirror that hung on the wall of the carriage and watched as her eyes turned into a glowing blue then a mist exited from the corner of her eyes. The act itself wasn't much, but she knew it would take effort to potentially maintain it for hours.

Nemura raised a brow but nodded.

Cerulean's eyes were wide and she just smirked as she reached for the door and opened it. "Let's go. Remember, this is normal."

He quickly nodded and she exited. Sloane glanced at the Westari spy as he stepped out of the carriage behind Nemura and Stefan. The knights had already taken up positions outside and Tiberius sat on Ismeld's shoulder. The falcon eyed her, but otherwise kept fairly still. She huffed a laugh.

He squinted his eyes at her. "What?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

Sloane raised her arm and Tiberius took off from Ismeld's shoulder and flew over to her, took a slow, lazy circle, and landed on her right shoulder. Gisele gave her a look, shaking her head, and Sloane heard gasps and murmurs from numerous passersby. Several guards at the front had shocked expressions and one had even gone running inside.

Cerulean seemed to be rethinking some previously held notions.

"Alright, fall in, and let's go. Ser Gisele, if you will," she said.

Gisele nodded and moved to the front. Sloane followed behind the orkun knight and looked around. Luckily, none of the guards moved toward them, but more than one stood with open mouths as they stared at Tiberius and her eyes. More whispers and pointing confirmed that, yes, her eyes were performing the function she wanted.

The first people to address them were the guards at the entrance who stood with a telv official of some type in a tunic of fine make. The telv's tunic was red with gold trim over some dark brown trousers and leather boots. She appreciated the theme that was going on in the city. The people here clearly had a style and they stuck to it.

"Greetings. Welcome to the Hall of Governance. Do you have an appointment or how may I assist today?"

Sloane noted that the man did not give a name, but she paid it no mind. Gisele stepped to the side and Sloane addressed the man. Satisfied in how he gasped when he caught sight of her

glowing, mist-filled eyes, she spoke before he could. "I am Baroness Reinhart of Blightwych. We have traveled here from Westaren on business with the Banking Guild and the Guilds at large. I also bring news that is of utmost importance to your General Irileth and ruling council."

The man struggled to regain control over himself, but finally, he managed to gain a semblance of composure. "Do you have an appointment?" he said, but with a much smaller and more forced tone.

Sloane shook her head. "I do not. However, I am sure the General at least will appreciate my... warning. The safety of your city depends upon it."

"Wryyaaatt!"

Tiberius emphasized her point, causing the man to jerk in surprise.

"Uh. Right." The telv looked around, then settled on the closest guard. "You, come with us. We must escort the baroness to the council chambers."

Sloane tilted her head. "Is the council in session? Will the general be present? It is *important* that the general attends."

The man gestured to the entrance, and Sloane and her party started following as the man led them into the building hastily. "Yes, My Lady. He is there. I sincerely hope your message is as important as you say because we will be interrupting."

"Do not fear. It is," she assured the man.

She glanced back at Cerulean and gave him a nod. Her smile expressed her satisfied feelings at the ease they were able to obtain an audience. *Or at least get through the door.* The man removed his hat and gave her a bow of his head, the hat moving into a satchel that he had put on before leaving the carriage.

The group moved through the Hall and Sloane was barely able to keep up with the telv as he speed-walked through the halls. The telv guard he had directed was half walking, half sprinting to stay next to the man. They reached a set of ornately engraved wooden doors. The engravings themselves were filled with gold filament and the trim was painted in that same red that pervaded the entire city.

The official that led them quickly walked over to the guards and spoke quietly to the one on the left. After a hasty back and forth, the guard walked over and opened the door. He gestured a signal to wait at the official then slipped inside.

Sloane shifted her stance to wait, but the guard returned not even two minutes later. When he emerged, he gave the official a single nod and then opened the door wide.

The telv motioned for them to follow, and they entered the council room. When she entered, the first thing she noticed was the large circular table in the center of the room. Seven chairs surrounded it equidistant from each other. Each chair was masterfully crafted of wood and trimmed in gold. She glanced at one of the ones to her left and was satisfied to see that the fabric was tufted and featured the red to finish the aesthetic. *This city is going to make me so tired of that color.* Each chair was filled with either a telv or high elf except for a single sun elf woman on the opposite side. They all wore extravagantly adorned robes and jewelry. Each was older than her. The sun elf seemed to be the one closest to her age. Each had a shocked expression on their face as they noticed her.

There was an old telv man in armor that had a golden finish on it standing next to the table. His armor was as ornate as everything else around her and clearly was more ceremonial than functional. What caught her eye was the two birds of prey that were engraved on his chest piece. By the expression on his face, he must have noticed the parallel as well, because his eyes were locked onto the falcon on her shoulder. In fact, he was the only one who wasn't staring at her eyes. *Interesting.*

The official moved to a location above a spot on the floor that had a painted crest of what she assumed was the city's. The man bowed his head and addressed the leaders of his city. "August council. Allow me to introduce Baroness Reinhart of Blightwych. She comes with urgent news from Thirdghyll."

The man moved away and motioned Sloane forward. She nodded and moved to the crest, centering herself on it as he had. "Good afternoon. As he said, I am Lady Sloane Reinhart. In case it is not obvious, I am a terran. Now, I say this because I wish to note that I am not an agent of any government. I do not care for your politics or maneuverings." She paused, letting the assembled group absorb that.

She glanced at Nemura behind her, then turned back to the group. "Thirdghyll has fallen. It has been decimated by monsters, and its survivors managed to retreat to a nearby town. Guildmaster Romaris is there stabilizing the town for members of the Guilds. However, that is not why I am here."

The members at the table started murmuring to each other and the General narrowed his eyes. "Then why are you here, Lady Reinhart?"

"Vlaredia has taken Goosebourne and even now is consolidating to move forces south."

The council room erupted in noise. Who knew eight people could get so loud as they tried to speak over each other. She waited. They kept clamoring for attention, but she ignored it.

Finally, an older high elf slammed his hand on the table and yelled out, finally silencing his colleagues.

She gave the man a nod, and he addressed her, “Lady Sloane. First, allow me to speak for my fellow council members, and thank you for bringing this to our attention.” That got her nods from all of the other council members. The old, grey-haired elf looked around before continuing. “What proof do you have of this?”

“I have seen it.” She pushed mana into the connection she had with Tiberius then she lifted her hand, pointing at the table. Tiberius took off and flew around the room, before crying out and coming back in for a landing in the center of the council. He looked around and all of them peered at the falcon in fascination.

The sun elf leaned forward as she peered at Tiberius. “What is that?”

Sloane stepped forward. “This is Tiberius. He is an experimental *scout golem* that I constructed. I am...” she paused, remembering her conversation with Maud and Gisele. “I guess you can say, an Artificer. I use the mana that was introduced by the Flash to create magical items. Tiberius here is one such example.” She lifted her hand and showed off her watch. “I am able to connect with him as he flies and see what he sees. I was able to see the Vlaredian army as it entered Goosebourne. I saw the forces moving from it and heading south.”

She gestured to Gisele. “Ser Gisele is the Knight-Captain of the Order of Haven’s Hope. She can explain more.”

Gisele nodded and stepped forward. “I greet you council members of Marketbol.” She saluted the golden-armored telv. “General Irileth.”

“Welcome, Ser Gisele to Marketbol. Please,” the old elf councilman said, gesturing for her to continue.

Gisele took a deep breath. “Our caravan was forced to avoid eight patrols of six or more. As we neared the Agenval Forest, we were intercepted by a large light cavalry scout force but were able to get through unhindered. Our attempt to avoid any conflict with the Vlaredians lasted until we reached a hastily constructed watchtower just before the forest. We were attacked by a force of thirty-two that were garrisoned there. Lady Reinhart was forced to utilize her magic to protect the caravan... After the watchtower and all of the combatants were dealt with, we moved here as quickly as possible. The lady’s golem was utilized to maintain a scout behind us and monitored the Vlaredians. It was able to observe a force of around five thousand moving from Goosebourne. By our estimates, that is merely a fifth of what remains in the city.”

There were several gasps. Sloane glanced at the general who seemed to be grinding his teeth. She addressed him, “General Irileth, I do not wish to overstep, but my purpose in Marketbol was to establish relations with the Banking Guild and to purchase property within the city to settle members of my House here. I have a vested interest in the prosperity and safety of this city because of this.

“It has been suggested to me by elements from Westaren that your defenses may be... out of pocket. They also intimated that getting this information to you as soon as possible may allow you to reach out to other nearby Cities to request aid. While I am not one of your soldiers, I may be willing to assist in defending any interests I can establish here, should it come to it.”

The general narrowed his eyes. “Were you perhaps a military leader of your people?” Sloane shook her head in confusion, but the man continued before she could respond. “Then, while I appreciate the knowledge, I do know my job, Lady Reinhart. I do not require you to remind me of it. After all, you are not a soldier. We will seek you out if your aid is needed, especially since you have so freely offered it.”

Sloane nodded, internally wincing. “Very well.” *Let the soldier, do the soldiering Sloane.*

The sun elf tilted her head. “What *are* your interests in Marketbol?”

“I am unsure if this is a suitable time or audience for such discussions. I do not wish to waste your time.”

The woman shrugged. “You are already here, you may as well tell us what it concerns.” The other members of the council nodded along.

Sloane squinted, surprised. *Well, that’s different.* “I have a reference from Guildmaster Romaris on a business venture concerning the whole of the Banking Guild. I also have other plans concerning a venture for my House in particular that I wish to purchase a facility for.”

One of the old high elves let out an airy chuckle. “Well, then you will be requiring a meeting with me, Lady Sloane. I am Grandmaster Markus of the Banking Guild.”

Sloane raised a brow. “Oh. Well, do you have any availability in your schedule?” She smiled.

The man shook his head. “I do believe we can work something out, My Lady. It is the least I can do for warning our city of this threat.” He glanced around the table. “I also believe General Irileth has much to do, so I motion that we end this meeting to let the good general get to work on protecting what we hold dear.”

The other members nodded, and the other old elf that had spoken earlier stood up. “Thank you, Lady Reinhart. We will be in touch, perhaps you could join us for a meal sometime soon. If you will, please excuse us.”

Sloane nodded, recognizing a dismissal.

“Thank you.” She lifted her hand and Tiberius took off from the table and returned to her shoulder.

The sun elf raised a hand. “Lady Sloane, one last thing. I would love to meet with you concerning your... golem, was it? Please leave the information on where you are residing within the city with the adjutant that escorted you. We will contact you.”

Sloane bowed her head. “I will.”

She turned and followed everyone out of the room. Stefan spoke with the telv from before, giving the requested details. When they exited the Hall, Sloane sighed and let go of her constant channeling of mana. Nemura stepped next to her and whispered, “How are you feeling?”

Sloane rolled her shoulders. “I feel good. That wasn’t nearly as bad as I thought it would be.”

It was all pretty anti-climactic, to be honest.

* * *

It wasn’t long before they made it back to the inn. Cerulean had thanked her for not giving away his cover, and she had to admit she was a bit surprised it didn’t even come up. When they walked inside, Gisele stepped up next to her.

“You needed help, yeah?”

Sloane huffed a laugh. “I expected a bit more, to be honest. You guys were there for moral support. Although, I think the general definitely appreciated your report over mine.”

“Well, you did play into your role quite well,” Gisele said with a shake of her head.

Sloane raised a brow. “What do you mean?” She walked around a server who was setting some mugs down on the big table where the other knights were sitting. She moved to the two empty chairs at the end, her and Gisele sitting down to continue their conversation.

“Well, you acted like a noble who came in and tried to make demands outside of their experience. The general looked like he was going to pop a vein.”

Sloane winced. “I just wanted to...” She sighed. “Yeah, that wasn’t a good look. Oh well. He doesn’t need to like me, just make sure our people here stay protected.”

Gisele shrugged. “I agree. Although, I hope you understand that they will want to see what you *could* do in case the city itself comes under siege. You did offer to help.”

With a groan, Sloane buried her hands in her hands. “Shit. I didn’t think that through. It’s fine. We’ll deal with it if it comes to it.”

She felt Gisele’s hand patting her shoulder. “I’m sure you’ll do just fine. We should get back to training.”

Sloane nodded. “Yeah... We should. First—”

An elf man stepped up to the table, Sloane and Gisele looked up at him. “Lady Reinhart, Grandmaster Markus requests your presence tomorrow at the tenth bell. He will receive you at his office.”

Sloane glanced at Gisele. “Huh. That was quick.”

She turned back to the man. “I will be there with my retainer. Thank you.”

The man nodded and turned, almost walking into another woman who was waiting. Something seemed to pass between the two before the telv woman moved to the side and let him pass. She glanced at the table, but then focused on Sloane. “Lady Reinhart. I, too, come with a request for a meeting. Lady Emerys requests a meeting at your earliest convenience. May I suggest after midday so that you may refresh yourself when you have completed your meeting with the Grandmaster.”

Sloane squinted her eyes and glanced at Gisele, who shrugged. “Who is Lady Emerys?”

The woman raised a brow. “She is a member of the council? Lady Emerys expressed a desire to discuss your... uhh... Your bird?”

Oh! Her! “Oh! Yes, I would be happy to meet with her. Thank you.”

The woman bowed her head and proceeded to give her instructions on how and where to meet the sun elf council member. After she left, Sloane pointedly looked around before leaning toward Gisele.

“See anyone else ready to pop up out of nowhere and invite me to some meeting?”

Gisele snorted. “Better you than me.”

Sloane smirked and raised her brow.

The woman shook her head and pointed at her. “Don’t you dare even ask. I’m not going. I’ll make you take Ismeld.”

“But Giseeeee. It’ll be fun!” Sloane said in a singsong voice.

She tried to put her arm around Gisele’s shoulders but the woman ducked under her.

“I swear to Alos, woman. Don’t make me. I know where you sleep.”

“Don’t tease me with a good time, Gisele.”

She cried out as the woman jabbed Sloane so fast in the ribs that she didn’t even have a chance to try and dodge. “Ow! Damn it, Gisele!” She said and rubbed at her side. *That’s going to be a bruise by morning.*

Gisele scowled. “You want to start?”

Sloane remembered how long the knight had held a grudge against the guys. *Yeah... That’s probably a bad idea.*

“Alright, alright. Point made. You’re too good at holding grudges.”

Gisele nodded. “I appreciate the compliment.”