

Tourist Traps

Sloane was walking down the street with Maud and... Ismeld, of all people. She was looking at the architecture and the various shops that lined the main boulevard of the central—or noble—district. The city reminded her of many of the old towns all over Europe.

She had been marveling at a particularly nice mansion through a gate when Maud called out to her. “Sloane! Over here! This is important!”

Sloane rolled her eyes a bit. She was learning that Maud’s definition of important was vastly skewed.

She walked over to the redhead and looked at a monument of some type. It reminded her of Trajan’s Column in Rome, except that there were three distinct parts broken up by a broad engraved flaming ring.

“Is this the monument that commemorates the three times the city has been rebuilt?” Sloane asked.

Maud nodded, “Yes! This is the Triumph of Ghyll. The images start with showing prominent people and locations that existed during that phase of the city and end each section with what was lost. That’s why the top is empty, as a hope to never lose anything again, but always prepared to continue if it does happen.”

“The cap has a statue of Relena and Tenera, the patron goddesses of the city. Relena watches over those who have been lost and her sister provides the safety of night.” Ismeld explained.

“Safety of night?” Sloane questioned.

“Don’t ask me. Moon elves and the raithe have a weird obsession with the night. We actually don’t have many of either of their peoples in Blightwych. You wouldn’t tell it from looking at our group, but the kingdom is mainly populated with sun elves.” Ismeld added.

“Interesting. Is the rest of Westaren like this?”

Maud nodded as they continued on their tour. “Yes. Although, Thirdghyll is not nearly as respected as a city. The area is more impoverished than the rest of the kingdom. Each noble is required to maintain their own demesne, and the count here is notorious for only caring about his own. It’s why there’s such a vast difference between the central district and the rest of the city.”

Ismeld glanced over. “From what I have seen, the city would collapse into infighting and riots with the smallest spark.”

“Sounds about right. The oppressed can only take so much before they rise and say enough. There have been many parallels in my own world’s history.”

The three of them continued to speak as they showed Sloane the sights of the district.

As the three women entered another plaza, Sloane noticed what looked like a restaurant with tables outside. Sloan looked at her companions. “Is that a restaurant?”

“Ah, yes. They’re a new concept that started in the Sovereign Cities and is spreading through the noble districts of all the cities. It’s quite popular, especially with visiting nobles.” Ismeld responded.

Maud got excited. “Let’s check it out!”

They walked over to where a finely dressed raithe woman was standing at the entrance to the outside seating area. Sloane noted how *she* was able to wear pants without being judged. *I chose to go along with this House business, but man... it would be nice to have the option again. Should have chosen the pants Ismeld suggested before having to move full-time to dresses.*

“Miladies, how may I assist you today?”

Sloane took the lead and smiled. “Do you have a table available for three?”

“We do, Ladies...”

“Lady Reinhart.” She gestured to Ismeld, who continued.

“Lady d’Argin and this is Ser Delacroix. We are here from the Kingdom of Blightwych.”

The hostess curtsied smartly. “A pleasure, miladies. Right, this way.”

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The women sat at a table, sipping their wine while speaking about their homes and various trends across the numerous kingdoms of the area. It was a pleasant distraction, and Sloane enjoyed it. Then Ismeld broached a more difficult topic for her.

“Sloane, could you tell us about your daughter?”

Sloane froze. She didn’t expect Gwyn to come up today and had been trying to compartmentalize her feelings on the matter. She still cried herself to sleep most nights and had nightmares. The only way she could reconcile doing all the things she had and even enjoying herself was her fierce belief that Gwyn was okay somewhere in Eona. That didn’t stop her tears from welling up in her eyes.

Ismeld caught onto her hesitation but jerked her head toward Maud, who Sloane assumed kicked her under the table.

“If it’s too difficult, we can speak of something else.”

Maud placed her hand on Sloane’s. “Absolutely, Sloane. There’s no need to talk about something that hurts so much. It’s alright.” She said reassuringly.

Sloane smiled and shook her head while wiping her eyes. “No, no. It’s okay. I’d love to talk about Gwyn.”

Ismeld glared at Maud, who glared right back.

Sloane laughed lightly, “No, seriously guys. It’s okay. Gwyn is an amazing, intelligent, and sweet girl. She loves to draw and make crafts. She really enjoys board games and playing with friends.” Sloane chuckled.

“She loves playing soccer. Gwyn’s really good at it, too. She enjoys playing against the boys and beating them.”

Sloane paused as she thought of everything she could say.

Thinking about the day of the event, she continued. “We would always go grab gelato—which is a sweetened frozen milk and cream-based dessert. There were little places called gelaterias all over where we lived, and we loved to walk to them and just sit and talk while eating. She loved getting the strawberry-flavored gelato. I’m a diehard chocolate fan. Dark chocolate is even better.”

Maud smiled and almost said something, but Sloane continued.

“She does so well at school. It’s not like when a parent says ‘Oh, my kid is so good,’ but actually isn’t good at all. No, Gwyn genuinely excels at her education to a surprising degree and she loves doing science projects. Which makes me so happy.”

She felt a tear run down her cheek, so she grabbed her napkin and dabbed at her eyes.

“I have wanted nothing but the best for her and have done so much to ensure she had access to anything she may need. It was just her and I, ya know? It was so tough at times, but we got through it. Gwyn is so resilient and strong.”

Sloane ignored the two women as they glanced at each other before looking back at her.

She laughed. “And she’s an amazing travel buddy. Just don’t take her to a museum. You won’t get time to look at anything before she wants to move along.”

Sloane smiled as she fell into her thoughts, remembering all the great things about her daughter.

Ismeld surprised her when she reached over and grabbed Sloane’s hand, squeezing it. “You’re going to find Gwyn. I do not doubt it. She sounds like an amazing young lady, and she’s lucky to have you as a mother.”

“Yeah, I will. It may take some time, but I’ll find her. I just hope she’s doing alright.”

Maud smiled. “If she’s anything like you, and as cute as you say, Gwyn’s probably got some people wrapped around her finger. You two seem very close, so I’m sure she’s just as concerned about you. Gwyn's probably trying to find you herself as we speak.”

Sloane felt herself lightly smile at that thought. “Thanks, you two. I know I’m not the most rational at times, but I have to keep believing, yeah?”

“Of course. You need to keep hoping. Don’t let go of it.”

They continued polite conversation, but the mood had settled into a more serious atmosphere. Sloane's thoughts kept drifting back to her daughter.

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After they finished, Ismeld settled the bill while Sloane and Maud waited for her outside the restaurant’s area.

“What else do you want to do today, Sloane?”

“Well, I need to get with Cristole. He said he would take me by the Banking Guild. I have to establish an acc—”

Sloane was bumped into and she stumbled forward. Maud reached out and caught her before she could fall. “What the?”

Maud looked at her, and over at the person who had bumped into her. Maud’s eyes grew wide, then jerked her gaze back to Sloane. “Your bag!”

Sloane instinctively shot her hands to where her bag was, finding it gone. She turned and saw a telv in an oversized coat walking away with it at a brisk pace. Not wanting to lose the important things she had inside, Sloane immediately started rushing toward him. “Hey! Thief!”

The man’s head turned back to her and his eyes went wide as he saw her advancing on him. He immediately took off at a run. Knocking several people to the side as he scurried away from her. Sloane burst into a sprint after him. She heard Maud yell out to Ismeld, but didn’t spare the time to look back at them.

Sloane chased after the man, winding through the crowds. He was able to stay just ahead of her, constantly throwing things in her path, but she knew she was slowly gaining on him. She'd reflect on it later, but her body had definitely improved.

She tried calling out, "Someone stop that telv! He's a thief!"

Numerous people turned their heads, but not a single person took a step toward the rushing man. She had seen no guards either, which was surprising.

She pursued the thief down a side street, leaping or dodging over boxes and garbage the man flung at her. Sloane almost caught him, but he juked her, which caused her to slam into a wall while he pivoted and darted down another street.

"Shit. This mother—" She exploded into a sprint, trying to catch back up.

Sloane saw him cut around a corner into an alley, and she followed. When she entered behind him, she saw him slow down toward a dead end. He was panting heavily, but didn't seem overly concerned.

Sloane settled into a walk and strode toward the thief. "Just give me my bag back and we can go our separate ways. No harm done."

"You really got me running hard there, woman." Sloane heard him say under his breath.

The telv smiled as he gained control over his breathing, and she got a good look at him for the first time. He was about her height and had a short scraggly beard that was brown like his curtain-style haircut. His brown eyes showed the confidence of someone who knew something she didn't.

"You want this?" He asked as he held up her satchel by the cut strap.

"Just give it back, man. There's nothing you'd want in there, anyway."

He surprised her when he tossed it to the side. "You're right. It's not the bag we want."

She froze. *We?* Sloane instantly went on alert and quickly drew her sword from her hip. *Damn it. Why did I have to run off without Maud or Ismeld?*

The man laughed. "That little blade isn't going to save you."

Sloane heard steps behind her and shifted so she could still see the thief while looking back. Two raithe men were walking down the alley and both were big. One was barely taller than her, but the other was at least a whole head taller, and both were solidly built. They were also armed with clubs.

The telv thief stepped forward. "You're coming with us. The boss wants to meet you. We can either do this gently or not."

She decided to delay. "Who's your boss and what does he want with me? I'm nobody."

The telv laughed again, which caused the two raithe who had stopped at a distance to ensure she couldn't run to laugh as well. "Baroness Reinhart of Blightwych. A *terran*. Brought here by the flash like so many others of your kind."

He knew a lot about her, and she wasn't sure how. The man shook his head while she thought of her chances. "You're a long way from Blightwych, ain'tcha? But I think that's all just a scam. You're trying to hustle all those noble types. I can respect that. So, what do ya say? As one scammer to another. We won't touch ya. You come with us and you get to meet the boss."

"And what will the *Boss* do after that?" She questioned.

He spread his arms wide and splayed his fingers. "That's up to the boss. It's out of my hands from there."

Sloane sneered a response, "How very magnanimous of you."

One of the two raithe stepped forward. *Of course, it's the big one.*

"Look, you're coming with us. Your two friends won't find you here. There are no guards around, and no one else will help."

"You're crazy if you think I'm going to just come with you willingly."

The telv sighed. "Fine. Don't say I didn't try to be hospitable."

He jutted his chin forward and addressed the approaching raithe. "Grab her. Don't harm her too much. The boss wants her healthy."

Sloane turned toward the big man and lifted her blade. “Do not come near me. You will not like the result.”

The big man laughed. “Lady, you talk too damn much.”

She didn’t give him another chance, and rushed toward him and swung her sword at him. He blocked the strike with his club and then backhanded her across the face, causing her to fall back onto the ground. *Damn it. That was dumb.*

“Delon, I just said not to harm her too much.”

Sloane rolled to her knees and spit out some blood from her split lip. She grabbed her sword and stood back up.

Delon smiled. “You have guts, Lady. I’ll give you that.”

“Get fucked, *Delon.*” She snarled at the man. Sloane felt the blood coating her teeth.

The man just laughed as he approached again.

This time, Sloane knew she had no choice. She lifted her hand toward him, causing him to halt. “Last chance. Come closer and I’ll fuck you up.”

The other raithe stepped forward until he was behind the bigger man.

She readied her spell, pushing mana into her hand, ready to fire a Flashbang at the two thugs. The smaller raithe made up his mind and stepped around Delon and lifted his club.

She unleashed her spell, having it burst right at chest level in front of the two. The spell detonated into the same flash of light and loud noise as before. All three of the men accosting her cried out. The two raithe dropped their clubs as their hands shot to their eyes and ears.

Just like she had practiced against Cristole, she didn’t hesitate as she jumped into motion. She grabbed the first man by the shoulders and brought her knee up into his groin hard, eliciting a grunt as he collapsed. Sloane pivoted and brought her blade down on Delon’s wrist as he started to reach out toward her.

The blade didn’t cut through as Sloane expected. It got caught in the bone, which made the man scream out in pain. She put more force into the sword as she sliced backward through

the bone causing blood to spurt out from the severed artery while the hand fell to the ground. Sloane drew back and ran the man through with her blade, causing his eyes to go wide.

Sloane pulled the sword from Delon, forcing him to collapse to the ground, and turned toward the telv who was just starting to get over his initial disorientation. Sloane channeled a mana bolt from her hand and prepared to fire it at the man.

She watched as he rubbed his eyes and looked at her. “You fucking bitch. Don’t you know what you’ve done?”

“Yeah. This.”

She fired the bolt at him and hit him square in the chest. The bolt exploded through him and caused a flare of energy to burst out of his back.

Sloane spun around and gazed down at the whimpering raithe laying in a fetal position protecting his jewels. Delon, the bigger raithe, was bleeding out on the ground and didn’t seem to have much longer.

Dismissing the thugs from her thoughts, Sloane walked over and picked up her satchel. Crouching down, she opened it and verified the contents, happy that everything was still there, but frowned at the cut strap. *Going to need to fix that. I really like this bag.*

She got up and turned around to leave, seeing Ismeld and Maud running by the alley. Maud seemed to catch sight of her because she did a double-take and slid to a stop before calling back to Ismeld.

Sloane walked down the alley to the two knights. Maud called out to her first. “Sloane! Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. They’re not.”

Ismeld walked over to the men, seeing the last raithe that was alive. She kicked him and dragged him to his feet before slamming him against the wall. “Who sent you? What do you want with the baroness?”

“We–We were sent to grab the terran lady by Mr. Rowe. He’s been collecting all of them before someone else can.”

“Who else is taking the terrans?”

“I don’t know! All I know is Mr. Rowe is trying to get whatever he can out of them before they’re taken by someone else and never seen again. Someone with power.”

Sloane stepped forward. “Who is Mr. Rowe?”

“You don’t—Mr. Rowe is the boss. He runs everything that’s outside central. He’s the one really in charge of the city.”

Ismeld looked between Sloane and Maud. “He sounds like the local underworld head.”

“What do we do about him? Get the guards?” Maud asked.

Ismeld shook her head. “The guard won’t care. They’ll only care that he did this in the noble district. No, we’ll need to—”

“Please! Don’t kill me!” the man pleaded.

“We’re not going to kill you,” Maud said with conviction.

Sloane tilted her head. “Then what are we going to do with him?”

“We’re letting him go,” Ismeld stated. “You will take a message back to your boss, though.”

The man stammered, “T—Thank you. Of course. Whatever you want.”

Ismeld pulled the man close and spoke quietly. “You will tell your boss to stay away from us. If anyone else comes for the baroness, Tenera herself will not save him.”

The blonde knight shoved the man as she stepped back. He instantly ran, not even giving the bodies a spare glance.

Ismeld looked around before addressing Sloane and Maud. “We should get back. You have *everything* of yours, Sloane?”

Sloane nodded.

“Good. Let’s go.”

Sloane made to follow the two women but her gaze paused on the two bodies of the men she had slain.

Maud looked back. "Sloane, are you coming?"

Sloane peered up at the woman. "Yeah. I'm right behind you."

She didn't speak again as they walked back to the inn and to where the rest of the group was.

Sloane closed her eyes as she sat down at a table. Ismeld and Maud were with the others, recounting what had happened.

She started to tear up while she went over everything again in her head.

I barely hesitated in killing them.

What is happening to me?