

Casanovas and Espionage

Sloane arrived at the ball to little fanfare. The guards at the gate spoke with Stefan and checked them against a list they had. At her side was Elodie, and after entering the grounds, Stefan fell in close behind them. She had arrived before the knights, who would attend the ball separately. It was part of the plan to make it seem as if the two groups were drifting apart. It likely wouldn't fool many, but it would at least keep the attention split, instead of focusing on the group as a whole.

They walked into the vast courtyard of the count's estate, which was filled with richly dressed nobles and well-to-do commoners at various standing tables that adorned the grounds and gardens. Elves, raithe, and telv gathered in small groups talking and drinking wine and champagne. Everywhere she looked were guards with their finest ceremonial wear and all matched perfectly. Not a single one was a race other than raithe or moon elf, which Sloane found curious.

As she led her small House group toward the estate proper, an attendant stepped forward to greet her. They spoke briefly, and after but a moment, they were let past. The attendant stepped away from his former post to go deeper into the estate. *Perhaps reporting on my presence?*

Everywhere she looked, Sloane saw excess and extravagance, which wasn't an uncommon thing amongst people she had known back home. The only difference being the person here deliberately seemed to do it to the detriment of those they governed. Sloane considered it similar to something like an African warlord or dictator to a true leader. She would hold her opinions until she met the man, but, thus far, she saw no reason how any nation could allow such blatant corruption to continue.

She looked at Elodie to her right. "Elodie, have you been here before?" She asked and gestured around at the gold-trimmed frames and vases, the marble columns. Everything that would easily be placed within a royal palace, but seemed odd in the home of someone in control of a fairly poor region of a small kingdom.

Elodie glanced at Sloane. “Here? No. Never.” The woman eyed their surroundings, taking in the decor. “It’s certainly something.”

“Where does he get the money for all of this? The central district is decent, I guess, but everything else seems to be lacking,” She asked.

“It’s because instead of improving his county, he taxes his people and the businesses excessively. It then makes its way here,” Stefan chimed in from behind them.

Sloane nodded. “Why does the kingdom allow it?” She asked and looked back at the raithe.

He shrugged. “I do not know. The guildmaster may.”

Sloane simply shrugged and continued. They followed a hallway, passing groups of aristocrats along the way, and entered another that was lined with guards. One moon elf guard stepped forward and led them to the hall proper. They entered through a set of double doors and saw a vast ballroom floor down a set of stairs. Tables were spread throughout the hall and servers patrolled with platters of food and drinks. Just inside the doors, at the top of the stairs, was a finely dressed raithe in a scarlet colored doublet and with his white hair braided into a ponytail draped over his shoulder.

After the doors closed behind them, the raithe looked them over with a disappointed look. “Your name, My Lady?” He said almost lazily.

Elodie raised a brow and answered for them, telling the man her title and House. The raithe didn’t seem to care and turned and called out in a loud almost bored voice, “Presenting, Baroness Sloane of House Reinhart from the Kingdom of Blightwych.” He then turned to them and spoke in a lower voice, “Lord Kayser sends his regards, My Lady *terran*. Enjoy the ball.”

Sloane shook her head at the comment but ignored the rude attendant, not knowing how to respond. Elodie, however, scowled at the man as they passed him and started descending the stairs.

She took note of the many eyes that had settled on her small group as they made their way down. Several even seemed as if they would step forward the moment they set foot at the base. She gazed and sized up the crowd and immediately zeroed in on the one person here

already that she knew. Standing at the bar and talking with a group of Loreni, was the high elf Guildmaster of the Banking Guild and Elodie's uncle, Lanthil Romaris.

Sloane whispered to the woman next to her, "Could you please go meet with your uncle and see if he would be available to speak?" She inclined her head toward where the man was standing, allowing Elodie to pinpoint her kin.

"Of course. You do not need assistance?" The young financial advisor asked.

Sloane smirked. *You are way out of your element here, girl. I just have to pretend they're all CEOs and politicians. Smile and nod*, she thought, but she just replied with, "I will be fine."

The woman nodded and stepped away as they reached the base of the stairs. Stefan stepped forward next to her. She quickly glanced at him. "Are you off to do your thing, or will you remain by my side to maintain appearances?" She asked, sotto voce.

"Let us get through introductions. I will slip away after," He replied, equally quietly.

They barely made it three meters before a pair of moon elf men stepped forward into her path. She looked over the purple-skinned elf who had way too much cologne on *or is that perfume...* He had a closely shaved beard and a receding hairline that nearly reached his ears. *Talk about a widow's peak*. He seemed middle-aged and instantly— "A new face! Glorious, splendid!" —came off as a pompous prick. *Lord, if you're watching over this world, give me patience. Alos? Eona? Anyone?*

"Greetings?" she asked, not wanting to say much else.

"Ah, I was just telling Lord Andrei here that there should be another terran noble within Ghyll's high society. The other one is such a bore," the elf explained.

Sloane looked at the other moon elf, a more blue-skinned man with a much better head of hair, sharp jawline, and narrow nose. A small pencil-thin mustache lined the smirk he showed as he looked her over. She returned the scrutiny and took in the man's attire. He wore a black vest with gold trim and embroidery. His pants were form-fitting and were bloused above a pair of shin-high leather boots that also had gold trim. She had to admit, he was much better looking than his annoying companion.

“Lord Andrei, is it?” Sloane asked, ignoring the other elf.

The man stood straighter and gave her a bow. “That is I. Lord Andrei of House Vasile. My rude friend here is Lord Leon of House Iliescu. It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Sloane. What was it? House Reinhart? Did I hear that correctly?”

Sloane nodded. “That is correct. Now, how may I help you two gentlemen?” She asked, looking between the two men, trying not to scrunch her nose up at the overwhelming smell of perfume wafting off of Lord Leon. *Less is more, my dude.*

Lord Leon took that as an invitation to join in the conversation again. “Why, we simply wanted to get to know you! It’s not every day a new noble joins our little club. Will you be in Ghyll long? We absolutely must meet for drinks or entertainment sometime.”

Sloane raised a brow. *Ah, these two are running game? Oldest trick in the book, Andrei.* She put on her best smile and looked straight at Andrei. “Oh, that does sound *splendid*. However, I must confess that I have been exceedingly busy. In fact, I am only here for a short while for business before I must continue on my journey. I am only here tonight to meet with the *bore* you mentioned earlier and perhaps, Lord Kayser.”

Lord Andrei’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Leon, didn’t we see Lady Ansley earlier? Didn’t you want to speak with her about the new play she was sponsoring?”

Leon looked at his friend with a slightly confused expression before his eyes widened and his nostrils flared. “Oh, yes! I absolutely must speak with Lady Ansley.” He turned toward Sloane and reached out his hand palm up. *No way.* “My Lady, it was a wonderful pleasure to meet you...”

Sloane simply smiled and nodded. “It was indeed.” She turned her head back toward Andrei and caught Leon’s scowl as he withdrew his hand to his side and walked away.

“Don’t mind him. He’s an only child, and can’t help himself,” Andrei tried explaining.

The two started slowly walking along the edge of the crowd, Sloane trying to veer them toward where she knew Elodie was. “Oh? That’s quite unfortunate that his parents would allow their only child to act in such a way.”

Andrei shrugged. “The perils of overloving a child, but what can you do? It’s why I tend to be by his side. He’s a good man, just a bit over the top. I try to rein him in, and ensure he doesn’t cause too much of a ruckus.”

“How valiant of you, Lord Andrei.”

He chuckled softly then reached over and grabbed two glasses of champagne from the tray carried by a passing server. He handed one to Sloane and took a small sip from his own. “How are you enjoying our fine city? I must say it is one of the finest in the kingdom.”

Sloane fought the expression that was threatening to show on her face. She nearly raised a single brow, the same one Gwyn always called her out on when she was dealing with someone without sense.

Sloane calmed down by remembering what her daughter would say, *Mom, put that brow away. It’s a deadly weapon.*

“Your city is certainly something. I have been all over the district while we have been here, and there are many things to see and do. Great people to meet. It feels so safe and calm.” She ground out.

“Exactly! I am gladdened you think so, Sloane. Is it alright if I call you Sloane? Please, call me ‘Andrei’. I would be happy to show you some of the lesser-known locations that are to die for,” He said before delving into talking about some of his favorite spots that they both just had to see.

“I’ve certainly seen at least one spot that fits that description,” she added with a sardonic smile.

“Oh? Where was that?” He asked, with seemingly genuine curiosity.

Sloane looked up and saw that they were nearly at the bar where Elodie was speaking with her uncle. She glanced at Andrei and replied, “Somewhere along the main street. I simply can’t remember. I was in a rush, and I nearly got lost in the side alleys. Luckily, it was all over in a flash, and made my way back to where I am staying.”

“Ah, that’s quite alright. Perhaps I can join you as your guide? I understand how a Lady can sometimes get overexcited and disoriented in a new location. All the fascinating stores to

shop in.” They spoke while walking, Andrei dominating the discussion, speaking about how wonderful he was and how great it would be to entertain her while she was in the city. Sloane noticed several women looking at the two and raising their noses before turning away. Men seemed to stare slightly longer at her, many not even subtle about where they looked. She felt disgusted. It was all she could do to not just walk away.

The man continued talking. Pulling out every trick he knew to try and take her home. “I would love to have you over for some tea at my manor, perhaps I could show you my collection of art after?”

“I appreciate the offer, Andrei, but I must decline. Please accept my apologies, but I am thoroughly too busy. Speaking of...” Sloane turned toward the group they had approached. “Guildmaster! It’s a pleasure to see you here. I was just asking Elodie before this when we would get to see you again.”

Lanthil looked between her and Andrei before turning toward the group that he was with. “A moment, please.” The group said some last words and politely excused themselves from the area.

Sloane looked at Stefan and gave him a slight nod. The raithe’s eyes narrowed at Andrei but he gave a curt nod to Sloane before moving away from the group. She looked around as he walked away. Several other individuals pointedly turned away as her gaze passed over them. It seemed she’d already made herself a bit unapproachable, at least among the peerage. Excepting the Casanova-wannabe at her side, of course.

Several young nobles at the other end of the bar had what looked like some small glasses of grappa or some other type of clear liquor. The champagne she was drinking was lacking, and she wished there was either a good red or even a dry white wine to drink. Living in Italy had definitely spoiled her. *I would kill for some prosecco right now.*

“Andrei, dear, I appreciate the welcome. Now, if you would please excuse me, I must speak with the good Guildmaster, here,” she said dismissively. Sloane had no time for such men.

The man in question, however, seemed a bit put out. “Lady Sloane, we were having a lovely discussion.”

Sloane turned and faced him completely, she paused before saying anything, choosing to take a moment and look at the man. She saw the barely hidden frustration on his face and a bit of... *excitement*. She could only imagine how he saw her, or the situation. Perhaps she had simply made herself more desirable to him because she didn't instantly fawn over him. From the expressions the other women had shown, it didn't seem as if he was too liked. *How men like this always find more and more women willing to sleep with them, I'll never know.*

Andrei scrunched up his eyebrows as he took in her unimpressed gaze. He opened his mouth to say something, but she leaned in close and whispered into his ear, "Look, I know the game. I know how you simply wanted to make yourself more interesting by having your pompous friend introduce himself first. You're so transparent it hurts. Now, excuse me." She stepped back and watched a whirl of emotions play over his face.

Finally, he smiled and took a step toward her. "Do you think you could slap me before I leave?"

She raised her brow and scoffed. *Is this guy for real?* "Look, I have actual business with actual adults. Please, run along now." She didn't even give him a moment to respond before she turned around to see the shocked expression on Elodie's face and the amused look on the Guildmaster's.

She listened as Andrei finally turned and stomped off. *That will probably come back to haunt me somehow.*

"My apologies, Guildmaster Romaris. It seems some here are *overly* welcoming," She said to break the ice.

Lanthil responded with a laugh and turned toward the bar, raising a hand toward the bartender. "Two glasses of your sesora." He quickly turned toward his niece and asked, "Elodie, would you like a glass?"

"Please, thank you."

"Three!"

Sloane waited as the bartender grabbed a bottle of something and poured a yellow-gold liquid into three glasses and then set them on the bartop for Lanthil to grab. The man picked the glasses up, handed one to each of the women, and then raised his slightly. “To future business.”

Sloane repeated the gesture and took a sip. *Ah, wine. That’s good.* “This is excellent, Guildmaster. Thank you.”

“Lanthil, please, My Lady. After tonight, I believe we shall have a long-lasting, mutually beneficial relationship between my family and your House. Now, Elodie here has told me some of your progress and how she is quite interested in continuing under your employment. I must say, I am pleased to hear that.”

Sloane took another sip and glimpsed at the elf woman. It seemed that she had been correct in assuming the high elf would tell her uncle of what was occurring in her House, and she was glad that she and the knights had been cautious about what the two new members of the group had seen or heard.

“Elodie has been a wonderful asset. I look forward to working further with her. I wanted to ask you, however, have you seen the other terran noble tonight at all?”

The man confirmed that he hadn’t and lifted a hand. An elf seemed to materialize from the crowd and stepped forward. Lanthil whispered into his ear, and the man leaned forward and replied. With a nod from the Guildmaster, the man melded back into the crowd, and Sloane quickly lost sight of him.

Her surprise must have been apparent, because the Guildmaster answered her unspoken question. “My position requires me to have protection. I bring a suitable number for everything I attend. The Count and I have an understanding of the matter.”

She just nodded, and they spoke of various business topics while listening to the music that was playing in the background. A group of raithe were on a stage playing what looked like cellos and lutes. The sound of their songs was melodious and soothing, and just loud enough to fill the room over the sound of people talking.

Lanthil asked how Guilds were in her world, and she explained superficially about banks and corporations. The entrance opening interrupted them and the raithe at the door called out

an introduction. “Introducing Lady d’Argin of House Argin and the Knight Order of Haven’s Hope representing the Kingdom of Blightwych.” *I really need to learn more about Ismeld’s past.*

She watched as the group descended the staircase. The crowd all turned and started whispering about the knights that had entered the ball. It seemed that the attention she had on her previously was already forgotten. *Good job, Gisele.*

Sloane was about to turn back to the guildmaster when she caught sight of a man, one with rounded ears. She narrowed her eyes and quickly glanced at the guildmaster and Elodie. “I’m sorry to leave suddenly, but there is someone I wish to meet.”

She caught the guildmaster following her gaze in her peripheral vision and then heard him speak to Elodie. “Join her discreetly.” He then spoke to her as she started to step away. “I’ll have some men watch over you.” Sloane nodded and walked toward the man.

She moved through the crowd, avoiding catching anyone’s eye as she zeroed in on the other terran. He was talking with a group of raithe and moon elf aristocrats as if he had done the same song and dance many times before. *Maybe he has?*

As she got closer, she managed to get a better look at the man. He wore a navy blue coat with golden buttons on either side. The back of the coat had a tail that draped down below his rear. Under, she could see the top of a vest and a ruffled shirt below that. He had white slacks that ended just below his knees. He wore what seemed to be stockings and boots that came just above his shins. *What is he wearing? I haven’t seen anyone else wear anything like this.*

Sloane tilted her head and confusion as looked at the man. He did a slight double take on her before smiling and walking up to her. The man was nearly a head shorter than her own, one-hundred eighty-six-centimeter in height. She guesstimated him at around one-seventy-ish centimeters. “My, you’re a tall one.”

She raised a brow at that. “You are Baron Bolton, I presume?”

The man laughed, and replied in a distinctly British accent, “I see that my reputation precedes me! Why, how does a lovely woman such as yourself know of me?”

“You are apparently the only other terran noble in the city. I would be surprised if you hadn’t heard of me yourself,” she said.

The man gestured to a nearby door, and she followed him out onto a balcony that overlooked the city. She saw the garden below with the various rich and well-off people speaking. In the distance, beyond the lights of the central district, she saw dilapidated buildings and smoke from numerous chimneys. The inner wall created a barrier between the two situations in the city. The differences were night and day. She looked to the side and saw another walled-off area of the city with a sprawling set of buildings, gardens, and paths. She recognized it as the Westaren Academy that she would need to visit soon. The state of the city was appalling, and it still baffled her why no one else stepped in.

“Ah, yes. I am curious how well you have taken to this primitive world. The city is a cesspit, even if they attempt to make it seem that their noble district is the peak of society.” He said from next to her. She turned her head and looked down at the man as he continued. “The *terran* woman. I have indeed heard about you. A *noble*.”

Sloane narrowed her eyes, but shrugged. “I have made do. I arrived in the middle of nowhere. Alone. Luckily, I came across some helpful people.” She declined to mention anything about Gwyn. She was getting some weird vibes from the man.

He narrowed his eyes. “Where do you call home? Your accent, I cannot quite place it. Your English is wonderful, but you’re not of the Empire. I can tell that much.”

Sloane raised a brow. *Empire?* “What are you talking about? Empire? I am from the US, but I lived in Italy.”

“The you-ess? Where is that?” He asked.

Sloane jerked in alarm. *What?* “What do you mean where is the US? The States? You’re British, right?”

“Of course. Do not question my sincerity even if you wish to lie. What are these states?”

“You’re telling me you haven’t heard of the United States of America?”

The man’s eyes narrowed and Sloane just got even more confused. He took a step back. “United States of *America*? Do you mean the *colonies*? I do not care if we are in another world. Those words are treasonous.”

Sloane stood dumbfounded. *What the actual...*

“What are you talking about? Are you joking with me right now? Come on. You can stop,” she said.

He raised his cane off the ground as if affronted. “I am most certainly not *joking*. We put down that silly rebellion thirty years ago. Who are you?”

Bolton scrutinized her with furled brows. “Your name is *Reinhart*. You claim to live in Italy, yet you say you were born in America, and use the name the rebels called the colonies. Your entire persona is a lie. You are certainly no noble.”

Sloane was starting to get angry. “Oh, come on, we are literally in another world and what you're saying is more fantasy than the elves around! What is your deal? You know what? I'm done with this.” She started to turn, but the man grabbed her wrist and yanked her back around.

Before he could say something else, she yanked her wrist, causing him to jerk forward. “If you do not let go of me, you will have something other than nonsense to worry about,” Sloane threatened.

The man scowled but let go of her nonetheless, except then his eyes widened. “I know your secret. You are one of Napoleon's agents. Your backstory is too fake and disjointed, you played your hand too far, spy.” He chuckled and looked pleased with himself, as if he had concluded the greatest investigation of the century.

The British noble ignored her and looked around, catching sight of one of the guards. “Guard! Over here, this woman is not a noble. She's an imposter. We need to see the Count at once!”

Sloane's head spun as she put together everything he had said. *Put down that silly rebellion? Thirty years? Napoleon? Where the hell is this guy from?*

She looked up just as several guards came toward her, swords in hand.

Sloane shook her head slightly, completely lost in the implications of what she had just heard.

The moon elf guard in the front spoke. “You will come with us. We're taking you to the count.”

Sloane jerked toward the guard. "For what reason?"

"For the charge of falsifying noble patents," the elf sneered.

To her right, the British man had a smug look on his face.

I need Gisele and Ismeld.

She scowled at the man. "I have done nothing wrong. You only have this man's word."

The raithe guardswoman scoffed. "He has the trust of the Count. You do not. Come with us now, or we will force you."

Sloane turned her scowl on the guards, calculating her chances.

Well, Stefan needed a distraction.

"Fine. Take me to the count." She looked back at the human. "We *will* get to the bottom of this."