The Dragonslayers’ Celebration Gone Wrong

1499 words

Never before have I had the privilege of attending such a grandiose celebration. All around me, people in delicate silk gowns and luxurious suits spin and dance the night away, celebrating a tranquility they had not known in years. Sweet, excited music emanates from the orchestra on the far side of the room, camouflaging the conversations of nobles in the two balconies.

"Don't tell me you haven't done anything but *sit here*, Nadia!" my best friend and partner, Maddox, questions as he jogs to where I sit. "This party is *for us*!"

"I know, I know," I grumble back. "I just don't know what to do with myself. Even back home I was never a partier. And this… is overwhelming."

Maddox lets out a noisy chuckle and shifts his stance onto one foot. Being a foot taller than me, Maddox is what he calls the "barbarian" of our two-person party. He never leaves home without his giant ebony war axe. A good thing too, since he landed the final blow on the dragon whose death we’re now celebrating. Even here, in the center of the King's palace, he wears the axe over his shoulder, brandishing it to all who stand behind him. "Oh come on! It's not *that* bad. The least you could do is make conversation with the King. He's been looking for you."

"He has!?" My legs automatically shoot my body to a standing position. Not a second later, my head becomes fuzzy and my balance begins to falter.

"Woah, easy, Nadia. The dragon smacked you across the head, remember?" he says soothingly, catching me with his arms. He helps me regain my balance, then grabs ahold of my hand. "C'mon. At least get something to eat. You haven't gotten anything yet. Besides, this party's going to last the whole night. It won't mean the end of the world if you don’t find him *now*."

A groan escapes my throat, which is soon followed by a grumble from my stomach. "Well, if the stomach says so," I huff. I let him guide me over to the table covered with pastries, snacks, and a smoked boar surrounded by an array of small fruits and vegetables. Just looking at the cuts of ham set off to the side makes my mouth water. A few paces to the left is the bar, with all kinds of wines and spirits set out for people to choose from.

While Maddox fills me a plate of food, I spot someone who stands out. At the bar a short distance from the very-drunk group of people sits a Tiefling, with belts and decorative chains scattered across his black clothes and low-hung jacket. His turtle-necked shirt covers the whole of his neck, and I can barely make out his porcelain face through his hair. Two thick horns adorn his forehead and tower a foot above his scalp. "Who is that Tiefling over there? I don't recognize him," I ask hesitantly. Just looking at him sends shivers skirting throughout my body.

Maddox stops snatching food and glances over at the bar. "Hmm… If I remember correctly, he's a sword fighter mage from the mercenary guild. He took care of the cult of assassins that popped up recently."

*I can see the swordfighter part, but he doesn't look like* anything *related to a mage,* I think, narrowing my eyes. "On his own?" I pry, returning my gaze to Maddox.

"As far as I know, yeah. He infiltrated their temple, and left very little behind. I don’t-"

Before he can finish, a loud clash sounds from outside the entry gates. Both of us spin to view the gate, my hands reaching for my bow. The noise escalates, making me think it has to be a struggle. All eyes are now pinned on the reinforced wooden gateway, the ballroom silent aside from the crackling of the flame-lit chandeliers.

For a moment, the commotion comes to an end. Suddenly, the gate blasts open in a flurry of smoke. A low-pitched shriek roar and the cackling laugh of a human echo through the gate. People around us begin to scream out in terror and scatter about the ballroom. As the smoke screen clears, I see its source. A giant skeletal dragon surrounded in green and black gaseous magic now dominates the open gateway, its boney wings held almost gracefully above its horned skull.

*The dragon that we defeated!? That magic is the work of necromancy!*

"Good to see you all again!" someone shouts from the gate, his voice like the taste of spoiled wine. From behind the dragon's foot a pale, hunch-backed man clinging to a staff walks out, an awful grin spread across his scarred features. "I'm sure you all thought your precious King was safe the moment that mercenary destroyed our home, eh?"

"An assassin," Maddox growls. His hands reach for the war axe on his back, swing it around once, then slam the shaft into the ground.

The assassin's gaze dances through the room until it lands on Maddox and me. "I see. This ball is in celebration of the mighty duo's victory against the monstrous dragon, yes?" A harsh wheeze shakes his body after the change in my expression. "I'm glad I brought it back for a second try at your lives, then."

Without another word, the beast shrieks again and scrambles toward us, its jaw wide open to snap at us. "Go, Nadia!" Maddox hollers at me as he dashes away. I rotate around the room too, my eyes scanning for the King on the balconies. The dragon is hot on Maddox's tail, preventing him from making a move with his axe. The dragon slows its pace and spins around, swiping Maddox off his feet with its tail. Thankfully, Maddox is quick. He jumps back to his feet and shouts, “Gaia, bless my axe with your might!” Earthen masses cover his weapon. He swings it up and slices its tail clean off, sending bones scattering across the ground. I notch an arrow and whisper to the arrow tip, enchanting it with black flame magic.

Before I draw, an obsidian-colored hand grips my bow. "Don't; those won't have an effect on a beast of bone." My gaze flicks up to the source of the voice. It is the pale Tiefling I noticed earlier, the diamond-shaped pupils in his narrow turquoise eyes staring directly into mine. His moderately low voice bears a small rasp, sending an odd chill down my spine.

That same moment, the assassin's gaze flicks over to me, his eyes narrow. With a snap of his fingers, the dragon skirts to a stop, whips around, and charges toward me. I tug at my bow, but the Tiefling's grip is strong. As the beast nears, it raises its bony claw and swipes down toward us. I release my grip on the bow, duck, and pray to every god watching.

But, nothing happens. All movement ceases. I glance up, only to see the shadowed underside of the great beast. The Tiefling has a grip on the dragon's claw, its body suspended in turquoise, gaseous magic. After a second, the magic makes the bones wither, and eventually the whole skeleton disperses into dust. I stare at him in shocked awe as the room begins to cheer. His hand drops back down to his side, and his head turns to look down at me. "Are you alright?" he asks me, his expression deadpan.

"I-I, er, yeah," I respond, my voice trembling.

"You!" We both return our attention to the assassin, who's pointing his staff at the Tiefling. "You're the one who laid waste to our temple! You-"

"Save it for prison, assassin," the Tiefling chides. He strides toward the assassin, who tries to speak, only for an invisible mass of magic to shove him to his knees. As the Tiefling reaches him, a pair of guards rush in from the gate, chains in hand. They bind the assassin, bringing him back upright. "I have only one thing to say to you: you're predictable," the Tiefling finishes with a nod toward the gateway. With that, the assassin is escorted out in silence.

"You think we should team up with him?"

I jump in surprise and spin around, meeting Maddox's gaze. A beat passes, and I glance back at the man, who is headed back toward us. Before I can say anything, Maddox brushes past me and says, "Yo, that was cool, man!"

His posture straightens at the attention. "Thanks," he responds simply.

"What's your name?" I ask.

His gaze flicks to me. "Ruka," he answers hesitantly.

*Not big on talking, huh?*

"Do you want to join our adventure party?" Maddox pushes. "We could use someone with talents such as yours."

His eyes widen some, as if he hadn’t anticipated the question. After a second, a smirk crowns his lips and he shrugs, "Sure. You seem to be fairly capable."

After that, the evening celebration continues in peace well past sunset.