

The Rescue

Without a hitch. That was the way the party was supposed to have gone. Sometimes, however, there were extenuating circumstances that good planning simply could not overcome.

Everything had begun well enough. The first guests arrived a bit early. This was expected and planned for. Snacks had been placed on a table by the garden and a minor company official had been stationed there to greet and entertain those early arrivals.

As time progressed, more people showed up. A full buffet awaited those who arrived on time as did a troupe of talented entertainers. When the time marked on the invitation came, I joined the crowd and began greeting and mingling with my guests.

This evening I wore a rose sundress with cream-colored trim and accents. I made me a bit overdressed for this world but this was the least I was willing dress down for a society party. Before the party started, I had called a local wizard who sometimes did work for the company. He had been polite enough to change my necklace from its usual deep emerald green to a deep, dark red. This accented my outfit nicely. Max could have done it but she had been busy attending to details of the party and I hadn't wanted to distract her. Of course, I could have used one of my own cantrips to do it but I have a rule about social events - always arrive with *all* your spells and abilities in place and ready to use. Its one of those family things that I've picked up over the years. There was one other addition to my ensemble. One that I wasn't pleased with but local custom could not be ignored. I was wearing a tanto blade on my hip.

Granted, it was a very fine, very old blade from my homeland. A birthday gift from when I had turned sixteen... so many years ago. The noble who had given it to me had died not too long ago. He had been old at the time he'd gifted me the blade. His intention had been to honor my father by honoring me. The blade had been forged by a master craftsman who had perfectly folded the metal over and over again. The haft was carved from a spirit dragon tooth. It rested in a sheath made of a single, beautiful piece of carved rose jade which faded to cream in spots and bloomed to crimson in others. My dress had been made to match it. So far as I knew it held not a single shred of magic... it was very simply the finest blade I had ever seen. And if you know my father, you also know I've seen a lot of very fine blades. Wearing such a fine blade was an honor. However, I also considered it to be grossly inappropriate for a lady to wear a blade at a social gathering. Any visible blade at least. Normally, I wouldn't have dreamed of wearing a blade to one of my social functions. Unless of course said function happened to be in the outermost of the Regillus Trace Consortium worlds - the Kingdom of Bristane.

Civilization was still relatively new to the world of Bristane and social conventions and traditions had not managed to catch up yet. Bristane was hot both in its blood and in its weather. Light clothing was worn throughout the year. Banditry remained a popular pastime in the outlying areas. Women all carried knives because knife dueling was legal here and the locals didn't really care if one side happened to be unarmed or not. Men were expected to stand at 500 paces and shoot arrows at one another. Fools. All the guests here tonight knew that I disapproved of dueling of any sort and that there would be financial and social repercussions for anyone dueling at one of my parties. Still, there could always be

a first and one must plan ahead.

Thus far, tonight was going well. The king would not be present but two pairs of the local princes and princesses were attending. There was also the local duke and a number of politically important people from other worlds who were here conducting trade negotiations at my request. Rounding out the outsiders was also a contingent of soldiers from Regillus who were here on an inspection tour of the trade routes. In addition to these folks there were a number of Dyle Alchemical employees from the local offices and factory as well as the lord mayor and a spattering of influential locals. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. The food and entertainment were as good as I had been lead to expect which was quite good indeed.

That's when *he* showed up.

I didn't recall seeing the fellow before. My parties had been crashed before but it didn't happen very often. My guardsmen were more than competent. Perhaps he'd snuck in or had accompanied some lady who had received an invitation and had abandoned her. Either would seem an appropriate fit for him.

My attention was first called to this tall, dark-haired young fellow when one of the servants signaled me that the fellow was drinking heavily. I always keep an eye on those who drink too much too quickly. If they became rowdy, their next drink got a little additive and soon they'd be sleeping soundly. So far, the young fellow wasn't being rowdy. Still, I kept an eye on him as I made my rounds and chatted with friends and guests.

Walking my chosen route through the crowd brought me closer to him. That's when he really got my attention. I'd come near enough to overhear what he was saying. In his case this wasn't particularly close because he had become rather loud. He was telling a story, evidently second hand, about a local bar wench and the...um, adventures... that she'd had with a number of his companions. I closed the distance between us quickly and asked him to keep his voice down and to speak on civilized topics. I also gave a surreptitious signal to the wait staff to "fix" his next drink.

Some ladies might have thought him handsome but he was too pretty for my taste. His filthy mouth also detracted greatly from his looks. In response to my request he began a rather rude discourse about how rich people did not seem to have sex. His own words were much more graphic. I interrupted his tirade by calling for Lord Istabar, the man who was leading the Regillus contingent and who also happened to be Regillus's master at arms. He typically considered tours like this to be vacations. A very no-nonsense type of man, I found his company most agreeable. However, as he came over, he was being helped by his second in command. Lord Istabar seemed to be in some distress. Noting that his pupils were dilated more than normal, and that he seemed to be sweating more than the warm weather called for, I suspected he'd been drugged. He happened to still be holding his wine goblet in one hand, so I gently took it from him and took a small sip.

Yes, there it was. A faint lime taste. Extract of erreso root. It wasn't a fatal poison but it was a debilitating one. I was very perturbed that someone would dare to poison guests at one of my parties. Still, there was the situation at hand deal with.

I asked the captain, who was Lord Istabar's second in command, if he would teach the rather obnoxious lout a lesson. The lout was currently sneering at Lord Istabar. This alone probably would have been incentive enough for the captain. He gave me a gentlemanly half bow, drew off an heavy leather cavalry gauntlet, and slapped the lout on both sides of the face with resounding whacks. He immediately followed the action by

challenging the fellow to an Regillus-style duel.

His cheeks a bright, rosy red, the lout agreed. The party moved across the lawn to the practice yard. During this time I had the staff take the master at arms into the castle and prescribed a treatment for him. Not wanting to miss whatever happened next, I hurried as much possible, while still maintaining a seemingly appearance, to catch up with the large group that was just reaching the practice yard. Almost immediately, both men drew swords and without further ado began fighting. The two men were quite good. I could have probably have beaten them both together but then that wouldn't be ladylike would it? Unfortunately, it seemed the captain was not quite as good as the other man. After a long exchange, the lout stomped on the captain's foot and immediately followed by smashing the hilt of his sword into the captain's face. I saw the captain's eye's roll up into the back of his head even as he was falling. With a sigh I gestured for servants to come and take care of the captain.

The lout turned to me. He gave a lovely speech infused with, shall we say, a great deal of local color. He finished it by asking me what I was going to do next. I told him that if he did not leave and there was no one here to match his skill at arms, then I would have to end the party early. I noticed that the prince and several of the other nobles seemed eager to find out if they matched his skill at arms.

That was when the fellow pulled out a whistle and blew a long blast on it. Oh dear. I consoled myself with the knowledge that there was simply no way to plan for some things when preparing for a party. As I had feared when he pulled the whistle, a striped battle cat jumped over the wall of the practice yard and quickly bounded over to its master. The creatures had wandered into this world some time ago and were quite popular with some of the local warlords.

Almost two meters high at the shoulder and draped in spiked plate armor, the big cat was rather impressive. It also had big teeth, claws and a riding saddle. The saddle was well made from at least three different types of leather. Grabbing me about the waist, the fellow leapt up into the saddle. I sighed again and called for Maxine to cancel my appointments for tomorrow. She began making the note as the big cat ran and sprang over the wall.

Immediately, the lout turned us towards the large, thick woods that effectively signaled the end of the Regillus Trade Consortium's influence. After running the beast for a half hour, we stopped and the fellow helped me down. The big cat sat panting heavily. Cats were great for quick bursts of speed but typically they don't do well with endurance.

I was rather surprised when the fellow began apologizing to me. Well, he apologized for kidnaping me anyway. To be perfectly honest, I was more upset by his language and the ill effect he'd had on my party than the kidnaping itself. Not that I let him know this.

He then began telling me not to be afraid but he was going to work powerful magic. We would begin traveling across strange worlds until we reached the place where his master lived. Annoyingly, he wouldn't tell who his master was. He seemed a bit injured that I wasn't more impressed with his great magic. He seemed to think that I didn't believe him. Whoever his master was, they obviously hadn't shared any information about me with this fellow. Had the cat been more rested, he probably would have immediately grabbed me up again and carried us both headlong on some old interworld trail to some other world just to show me how powerful his magic was. I wasn't really sure he wouldn't do that anyway. Frowning, I sighed again and began tapping my foot.

The pretty lout seemed rather aggravated and demanded of me just what I thought I was doing. I explained that I was impatient. This took him aback. I was anxious to go see

his great magic? To meet his master? No, I explained. I was anxious to be rescued. Whoever was supposed to be rescuing me was certainly taking their time about it. The fellow seemed completely baffled and muttered something about women being mysteries.

Which reminded me that I had a very important meeting to go to tomorrow. A meeting that couldn't be missed. I turned and apologized to the fellow. Right on cue he asked what I was apologizing for. My foot caught him in the sternum and propelled him backwards into the trunk of a nearby tree. The sudden motion caught the cat's attention. As the creature turned, I performed a springing backflip which carried me up higher than the cat's head. As I began to fall, I lined up between the beast's eyes and then punched the cat on the top of the head. Hard. The cat's armor rang like a bell. The beast crumpled to the ground even as I landed again. It did not move.

Not being in a great rush, I checked to make sure the beast was still breathing and also to see if I'd done it any brain damage. Everything seemed fairly intact. I then walked over to check the creature's master. He seemed to be made of pretty stern stuff as well and would recover fully given a little time. Not having my communications mirror on me, I began jogging back the way we had come. Half an hour later I met Lord Istabar and his cavalry force. He and half of his men escorted me back to the castle. The other half went after my former captor but, as matters turned out, were unable to find him or his cat.

I thanked the lord for his efforts and promised better wine at my next party. He in turn promised a more timely rescue.