
Bidding on the Future

While Mariel finally settled beside her, Sloane's heart raced with a tempest of emotions. The young girl's trembling form and the shimmer of unshed tears in her eyes both spoke volumes of the turmoil she was experiencing. Sloane had seen this coming, the inevitable confrontation of their feelings and fears. She had been avoiding this conversation. Mainly because it meant that she would have to woman up and face the implications of what it meant for the both of them.

It seems life has a way of throwing curveballs.

She had been so focused on Gwyn, stuck for so long as her world revolved around her daughter, that she had almost forgotten how to let anyone else in. But Mariel had slipped through the cracks, finding a place in Sloane's heart that she hadn't realized was vacant.

Drawing a deep breath, Sloane reached out, capturing Mariel's grey hands within her own. "Mariel," she began, forcing her voice to remain soft, yet firm.

Mariel's eyes welled up, tears spilling over, but Sloane pressed on, "Shh, it's okay. Just listen."

She hiccupped, wiping her face with the back of her hand. "I get it, Sloane. I really do—"

"No," Sloane interrupted gently, "Let me speak. I need you to hear this."

Nodding, Mariel tried to compose herself, her gaze fixed intently on Sloane.

The soft creak of the door opening momentarily distracted Sloane. She caught a fleeting glimpse of the newcomer but chose to focus on and speak to the girl in front of her. "When Gwyn's father passed away over a decade ago, it felt like my world had shattered. I clung to Gwyn, and she became my anchor, my reason for pushing forward. She was my solace, my purpose. And in that process, I built walls around my heart, thinking I had no room for anyone else. My love was reserved solely for Gwyn. I immersed myself in work, in being the best for her. Relationships, friendships—they all took a backseat."

Sloane's voice wavered with emotion as she continued, "For a long time, I believed my heart had reached its capacity to love. Sure, my family, especially mamma, papa, and my sister, held a special place in it. After all, they were my foundation. But Gwyn... she was my world. I didn't think there was room for anyone else. I was so engrossed in my work, in ensuring a future for her, that everything else faded into the background. I climbed the ranks swiftly, my dedication evident. But in that single-minded pursuit, I lost touch with the ability to connect, to love beyond the confines I'd set."

Mariel's eyes, wide and shimmering, were fixed on Sloane, absorbing every word, every emotion. Sloane's heart ached, but she needed to keep going or she would freeze up. "Then, in the blink of an eye, everything changed. We were enjoying a simple moment, sharing gelato, and suddenly, I found myself here, without Gwyn. The despair threatened to consume me. If not for the knights and their unwavering support, I might have succumbed."

Sloane's gaze drifted momentarily, recalling the faces of those who had come into her life. "I met incredible individuals like Reanny and her brother, and then there were Elodie and Adaega. But Stefan... Stefan was something else. He was initially there for Elodie, hired to be her protector. Yet, once he felt she was safe, he chose to stand by my side. To this day, I can't fathom what drew him to me." She smirked, a playful glint in her eyes. "This blade, who once strutted around as if he was Eona's gift to the world..."

Mariel's laughter bubbled up, lightening the mood. "He still thinks he's all that! But, you know, in an endearing way."

Sloane chuckled, nodding in agreement. "Absolutely. He's got a heart of gold beneath that facade. But heaven forbid he hears us say that. He'd probably go all out, maybe even don some black mascara to prove us wrong." Her eyes then shifted to the door, landing on the figure of Nemura. "And then there's Nemura. Our first encounter was... memorable. I had unintentionally scared some folks with my magic. She was so poised, so self-assured like the grandest of mountains." She heard a light snort which made her lip curl slightly. "I felt like a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar, trying to charm my way out of trouble." Sloane's smile grew fond. "But she surprised me, not once but twice. First, by leaving the city with us, and then by vowing to help find Gwyn. I often wonder what she sees in me."

She looked down at Mariel, her voice softening. "I hope, someday, I can truly feel *worthy* of the trust she's placed in me. Can you understand that?"

Mariel's eyes, shimmering with unshed tears, darted to Nemura and then back to Sloane. "Yes," she whispered, her voice choked with emotion. "I really do."

Sloane's fingers gently brushed Mariel's cheek, wiping away a tear. "That's how you feel too, isn't it? Mariel, you need to know that you're more than enough. It's not about you being worthy of someone; it's about them being worthy of you. Any mother would be blessed to call you her daughter."

Mariel's defenses crumbled, tears streaming down her face. "Sloane, I promise I'll—"

Sloane gently placed a finger on Mariel's lips, silencing her. "Just... let me finish," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. Drawing Mariel close, she enveloped the young girl in a protective embrace, her fingers tenderly combing through Mariel's hair. The warmth of their closeness seemed to amplify the weight of Sloane's words. "I've felt this moment approaching for a while. I've

been dodging it, torn between my loyalty to Gwyn and my growing bond with you. I feared that by giving you what you so deeply yearn for, I'd be betraying Gwyn. And then there were moments I doubted myself, thinking I wasn't enough for you."

Mariel pulled back slightly, her eyes shimmering with tears. "But Sloane, you're... you're incredible."

Sloane's gaze softened, a melancholic smile playing on her lips. "Mariel, I might never be the mother you truly deserve." Mariel's breath hitched. Sloane gently lifted Mariel's chin and looked directly into those pretty ice-blue eyes. "But life has a way of surprising us. You came into my life, Mariel. And without even realizing it, you made me remember what it felt like to care for someone else, to want to protect, to love. It doesn't diminish my love for Gwyn. It just means my heart has grown to accommodate you as well. If you'll accept me, flaws and all, I promise to stand by you till my last breath. I might be far from perfect, but I'll pour every ounce of love I possess into being there for you. I vow to cherish you as if you were my own flesh and blood, as any true mother would."

Mariel's eyes seemed to search Sloane's for a long moment, as if trying to fathom the depths of her sincerity. Sloane could feel the rapid beat of Mariel's heart against her own, the weight of the moment pressing down on them both.

Finally, Mariel's voice, soft and trembling, broke the silence. "Sloane..." She hesitated, taking a deep breath as if mustering her confidence. "Ever since I was little, I just wanted to feel like someone cared—truly cared about *me*. I never had that at the Church. It was always about duty and sacrifice, and I love Tenera, I love the Family... but I really just wanted to fit in somewhere. To be myself and not what others wanted me to be. You've never done anything except make me feel special. Like I matter. You might not think you're what I deserve, but to me, you're the best mother I've ever seen. I don't need everything to be perfect. I just... I just needed a... mom."

Mariel's expression shifted, her features hardening with a fierce determination that Sloane had rarely seen. As the young girl's ice-blue eyes began to glow and her sclera darkened to an inky black, it was as if a storm had awakened within her. She met Sloane's gaze head-on, and in that moment, Sloane could see no trace of the earlier vulnerability.

Mariel's voice was resolute, every word dripping with conviction. "And we have to find my little sister. And if anyone has dared to harm her..." She paused, her eyes narrowing, "Relena have mercy on them because I certainly won't."

Sloane's smile was gentle. "Then once we find her, we'll find somewhere for all of us to be safe."

From the corner of the room, a voice edged with steel, broke the momentary silence. "And if such a place doesn't exist, we'll carve it out ourselves. That's a promise."

Sloane's gaze shifted to Nemura, her eyes reflecting gratitude and understanding. "I'd expect nothing less from you."

The newly committed mother and daughter sat like that for a while, holding each other. Mariel, after taking a deep breath, pulled back slightly and nodded. "Thank you Slo-Mom," she whispered.

Sloane leaned down and gently kissed Mariel's forehead. The girl melted, giggling with excitement. "*Mom.*"

"Are you going to be alright?"

Mariel's head bobbed up and down. Her eyes were still glistening, but the emotions from before were gone, replaced by a light that made Sloane's heart soar.

"I'm *perfect.*"

Sloane nodded. She glanced over at Nemura and frowned. "Mariel, would you give Nemura and me a moment? Our conversation isn't over. We still need to plan on what to do about the Church. I... I don't think they're going to want to part with you willingly, and you will be a big factor in that. They'll likely want a word with you."

Mariel stood up, determination evident in her posture. "I'll be prepared." Her eyes darted to Nemura, a silent acknowledgment passing between them. "Go on, talk about what you need to. I'll use this time to practice. Before we leave, I need to learn more spells. Are we still heading to Calling?"

"Yes," Sloane confirmed. "We have until our arrival in Calling to persuade the Church to let you remain with us."

"I'll get with Stefan, we'll go to the library. I'll study this. There must be some precedents or solutions in the texts."

Sloane smiled. "Let me know if you need my help, I'll try and attack the paladin angle."

Mariel let out a light chuckle, her mood lifted. "Good luck with that. Paladins can be as stubborn as stone walls."

She gave Sloane one last hug, but one filled with newfound resolve.

Turning on her heel, she quickly exited the room, the door closing softly behind her. The room was suddenly filled with a heavy silence, the weight of the conversation still lingering.

Sloane's shoulders sagged slightly, and she let out a weary exhale, the tension she'd been holding in finally coming out in waves as her emotions threatened to spill out.

She looked up as Nemura took a few steps closer, her eyes searching Sloane's. "Are you alright?" she asked, her voice filled with genuine concern.

“Nemmy, that was... harder than I anticipated.”

“I imagined it would be. But it was necessary. So, Stefan's discovery about a second House Reinhart is accurate?”

Sloane nodded, her fingers absentmindedly tracing the edge of the bench. “Yes, it's true. We're still in the dark about its location. Our time in Calling will be crucial. The Banking Guild there might be tight-lipped, but we need every scrap of information we can get. Once Spring arrives, we'll send a message to Marketbol and await their response in Calling. I trust the Grandmaster will provide the details we need.”

“What about Toren?”

Sloane's expression turned contemplative. “Toren would've shared everything with Stefan. If he's unaware, it's genuinely because he doesn't have the information. But he's been engrossed with the Runecard's integration in the city. We need to meet with Lord Estos again, I think. We have much to do and... We've got, what, roughly ten weeks?”

Nemura nodded in agreement, her golden eyes reflecting her thoughts. “Indeed. Time is of the essence. By the way, the reader has been invaluable. I appreciate it.”

A faint smile tugged at Sloane's lips. “I'm glad to hear that.”

Nemura hesitated for a moment, choosing her words carefully. “Everything you told Mariel... did you mean it?”

Sloane's gaze was unwavering. “Every word. It's been a relentless journey. Being thrust into this new world made me realize the treasures I left behind. I just need to find Gwyn. Maybe then, I can find some semblance of happiness.”

Nemura's expression softened, her voice gentle. “You know, you were right about one thing.”

Sloane met Nemura's gaze, a question in her eyes. “How so?”

“When you told Mariel about worthiness. The same principle applies to you, Sloane. You deserve to be loved as much as you bestow it on others. I hope, someday, you truly see that.”

“Yeah, yeah. We have a lot of work to do, Nemmy. Let's get to it.”

“Right behind you, boss.”

Sloane rolled her eyes and made for the door, but she couldn't hold back the smile from forming.

I can't wait for you to meet your sister, Gwyn.



The next few weeks went by quickly, and Sloane found herself back in the Nornport Center's workshop looking at her **[Innovator's Archive]** that stood active. She *knew* what was happening and how it worked. But trying to replicate it was proving... frustrating. The spell positively *glowed* with runes throughout its structure. It was the most advanced... spell and yet not a spell that she had seen yet. Although the system called it a *trait*.

She now realized that traits were the system's way to reward improvement. To solidify her progression of her *self* in a tangible way.

The trait was clearly spacial, she knew that much, and yet it was paradoxically both highly restrictive and ridiculously broad in function at the same time. Whatever she placed on the shelves *had* to be related to her in some way.

Yet, Mariel's books, diaries, and notebooks lined several shelves. Sloane's notebooks and reading material all qualified. But boxes of supplies or even unfinished projects did not. It seemed like it could only accommodate written material.

But it didn't allow the written material of others unless it was documents that related to Sloane's House or businesses. So, the Archive *didn't* just hold research material, but it held anything related to what could potentially further her *innovation*.

That didn't explain the Mariel connection.

When she had discussed it with the others, it was Stefan who came up with a potential reason.

And it was quite simple. Not something she could refute.

The system saw Mariel as Sloane's daughter.

If her **[Shadowtender]** trait was anything to go by, Mana's Intent had recognized her as such for a while. Although, Sloane had to admit she wasn't sure why it chose that *specific* name. Sure, Mariel had some shadow magic along with **[Shadowmancy]**, but she was more focused on bones. Sloane would have preferred **[Necromom]** or something.

Clearly, the system knew something she didn't.

But, all of that led Sloane to her current project.

She reached up and grasped her new runic goggles, quickly sliding them back into place. They were made of blackened steel and were a solid piece that spanned her face rather than the stereotypical goggles a fantasy artificer would use. So, probably something closer to a visor than goggles. Either way, they gave her a fierce look and were protective along with being functional.

She quite enjoyed them.

With a mental flick of will, [**Artificer's Insight**] and [**Runic Knowledge**] settled into her. A quick tap of a rune on the side of the goggles activated [**Examination**] followed by one that turned on [**Mana Sight**]. While she could use the spell version of the sight, this allowed her to preserve her mental stamina for as long as possible.

Then, with a determined expression, Sloane *peered* at the spatial archive.

She didn't know how long she'd been at it, but Sloane's eyes, enhanced by her goggles, scanned the [**Innovator's Archive**] meticulously. Every rune, every spatial distortion, and every magical signature was laid bare before her. The intricate weave of magic that made the archive function was like a vast, complex tapestry.

Wait...

Sloane drew mana into her, but not... blue or any other color mana. She drew the same mana she relied on for her [**Mana Bolts**] or [**Arcane Barrage**]. All of her *arcane* spells didn't use colored mana, no, they were colorless. Just... like... this.

She flooded colorless mana through her body and used [**Arcanomancy**] and her [**Identify**] to gently probe at the spatial magics that flooded throughout the bookcase. It *wasn't* arcane, it was *space*, but they were so... close.

So similar.

It felt like she was deciphering an ancient language, where every symbol held profound meaning and could help with another. She delved deeper and suddenly, patterns began to emerge. The threads of spatial magic intertwined in ways she hadn't noticed before. It was all connected.

She felt as if she were looking at the fabric of reality.

No.

The *foundation* of this new reality.

And then, in a moment of clarity, it clicked. They no longer lived in a reality where space and time ruled all. There was a new pillar to existence. If time was about perception and space was the foundation, then arcane bridged between them, bringing about ways to impose true will upon reality.

A gasp escaped her lips, her heart racing.

It all made sense and no sense at the same time. But it was so beautiful that Sloane was almost brought to tears as she gazed into the depths of what Mana had done.

The epiphany was overwhelming, but Sloane's disciplined mind, sharpened by [**Artificer's Insight**], didn't allow her to dwell on it for long. Her trait brought her back from her moment of euphoria and onto the runes again. This time, the runic chain with two of the most complex runes

she'd ever seen stood out, but their significance echoed in her mind. Two runes that combined to create spatial storage. It was the key to manipulating space, the very essence of what she sought.

She reached for the pouch she had prepared earlier, then yanked a nearby enchanting pen to her hand with her **[Telekinesis]**. Time was of the essence, and she needed to capture this newfound knowledge before the clarity of the moment faded.

With swift, precise strokes, Sloane began to enchant the pouch. The runes flowed from her pen, embedding themselves into the leather almost mechanically.

Time held its breath as Sloane worked, and she flooded her system with blue mana, focusing her *artifice* on the task at hand.

She lost track of time as she worked, but as she finished, Sloane could feel the space within the pouch expanding, stretching beyond its physical confines. Eagerly, she tested its capacity, placing item after item inside. Her heart soared as she realized the success of her endeavor. The pouch, while appearing as a medium-sized satchel that would sit on one's hip, now held the capacity of a large backpack. A triumphant cheer escaped her lips, and a rush of *essentia* surged through her, validating her achievement.

Sloane released her buffs and dismissed the archive before she glanced down at her reader as the notification came through.

[Artificer – Step 61 attained!]

It wasn't much, but she had taken her first significant step in mastering spatial magic. Nothing would be the same.

The door creaked open, revealing Aila's familiar presence, but in a nicer dress than usual. She took in the scene before her. "Sloane? You still working?"

Sloane's face lit up, her exhaustion momentarily forgotten. She turned to Aila, a triumphant grin stretching across her face. "I just finished." Drawing a deep, satisfied breath, she continued, "I did it. Hand me that," she gestured towards a bronze statue of Erbium, the God of Crafting, that was clearly too large for any ordinary pouch.

Aila shrugged and handed Sloane the statue, her eyebrows raised in silent question. As Sloane effortlessly slid it into the newly enchanted pouch, Aila's eyes widened in astonishment.

"What?! How?" she exclaimed, her voice a mix of disbelief and awe.

"Spatial magic," Sloane replied with a hint of pride. "I figured out my **[Innovator's Archive]**."

Aila's eyes sparkled with excitement. "W–Wow. You're going to have to show me how you did that."

"Don't worry, I will. I need you to put out our best runic devices here. We have a lot of competition in Rosale, and we're going to position ourselves at the top."

Aila shook her head in admiration. "Amazing..." A soft chuckle escaped her lips. "Well, the reason I came to look for you is because I got us a slot in the next auction. The excerpt reader is going to be spotlighted."

"Finally! That's great!"

"But there's bad news."

Sloane raised a brow. "What's that?"

"It's today."

"Oh fucking hell. Shit, do I have time to change?"

"That's about all you have. I'll grab everything. Stefan and Nemura are both downstairs waiting for you with Mariel. We'll meet Lord Estes at the auction hall."

Sloane nodded. "Alright. Shit, okay."

Aila stepped out of the way as Sloane hurried out of the workshop. She paused as she stepped into the hallway and looked back where a large panther golem walked out behind her. Sloane winced.

"Sorry, Vesper."

The cat growled at her, unamused.

"Yeah, yeah. I know. I got caught up and forgot about you. I'm sorry."

The cat looked away and walked past her... and smacked her in the ass with her segmented tail. Sloane scowled. "I deserve that but... Ow!" she complained while rubbing the spot.

That's gonna bruise.

She shook her head, sighing, and followed along through the bustling center

The hum of conversation filled the air, punctuated by the occasional laughter or exclamation. Passing by a pair of researchers, she caught snippets of their animated discussion about the latest invention Aila made—a cooking pad. The device, they discussed with evident excitement, utilized a runic heating element, allowing for flameless cooking.

She couldn't help but feel a swell of pride. The center was thriving, and it was due to the hard work and dedication of everyone involved.

Everything was really improving. Rosale and Nornport in particular had really been the recharge she needed since arriving, and now she knew she could push on after Gwyn with less tension and more preparedness.

The recent heart-to-heart with Mariel had also lifted a weight off her shoulders. The secret plan to adopt Mariel was known only to her inner circle, and Sloane intended to keep it that way. The Church's approval was a hurdle they'd yet to figure out how to deal with, but Sloane was confident that when the time came, they'd find a way.

Reaching the ground floor, her gaze immediately found Mariel, Stefan, and Nemura. Mariel's eyes lit up, and she dashed towards Sloane, wrapping her arms around her in a tight embrace.

"Hey Mom," she whispered, her voice filled with warmth.

Sloane chuckled, squeezing Mariel gently. "You all didn't need to come just to pick me up," she remarked, glancing at Stefan and Nemura.

Nemura shrugged, a playful smirk on her face. "We were nearby when we bumped into Aila. Mariel needed some new outfits, and since I had some free time, I thought, why not?"

Sloane's eyebrows knitted in mild concern. "You shouldn't have—"

"It was fun," Nemura replied. "But Stefan was bored."

"I was. And I most certainly won't be doing that again," the raithe blade said with a dramatic eye roll.

Mariel leaned closer to Sloane, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "He'll do it again. He actually enjoyed himself."

Sloane chuckled, a playful glint in her eyes. "Let's not dawdle. I'll change, and then we can be on our way to the auction house. But first, a little something for you, Mariel." She extended the hip satchel towards the teenager. "For your *collection*."

Mariel took it, her brow furrowing in confusion. "This is... quaint. But it seems a bit small for my... collection."

Sloane's lips curled into a knowing smile. "Try channeling your mana into it."

Mariel hesitated for a moment, then did as instructed. Her expression remained puzzled.

Sensing her confusion, Sloane added, "I think I left something inside. Would you mind grabbing it for me?"

With a shrug, Mariel unbuckled the pouch and peered inside. Her eyes widened in astonishment. "Wait, what?" She reached in, pulling out a statue that was clearly far larger than the pouch itself.

Stefan cursed under his breath, while Nemura's eyes widened in disbelief.

Mariel looked up at Sloane. "H-How?"

Sloane tapped the side of her nose with a finger, her grin widening. "A touch of magic. Your mother has a few tricks up her sleeve."

Mariel's gaze shifted between the pouch and Sloane, admiration evident in her eyes. "You're... incredible," she murmured.

Sloane winked. "And remember, that's the very first of its kind. Hold onto it." She reveled in the stunned expressions of her companions.



The rhythmic clapping of horse hooves and the gentle sway of the carriage enveloped the group as they made their way to the auction house. They'd left the golems at the manor, choosing to not be excessively disruptive. The interior was dim, with only the occasional shaft of sunlight breaking through the curtains. Sloane adjusted her attire, ensuring everything was in place, while the others chatted softly.

They stopped in front of an imposing structure of ornate stonework and tall, arched windows.

The cold winter air nipped at Sloane's cheeks, prompting her to pull her cloak tighter around herself. Her fingers brushed against the familiar texture of the little wynver clasp, a memento from her time with the knights. It was a small comfort, grounding her in the present moment.

She glanced over at Mariel, her maternal instincts kicking in. "Keep your cloak tight. Do you have your gloves?"

Mariel rolled her eyes, an amused smirk playing on her lips. "Yes, *Mom*."

Sloane's fingers darted out, poking Mariel in the side just above her spatial pouch. The younger girl yelped, her eyes widening in mock surprise. "Don't sass me. It's freezing out here. I just want to make sure you're—"

But Mariel's grin gave her away.

Sloane raised an eyebrow, realization dawning. "You're messing with me."

"Yup!" Mariel chirped, pulling on her gloves with a flourish.

Nemura, ever the pragmatist, interrupted their playful banter. "Ready?"

Sloane nodded, then turned her attention to Stefan. "You alright?"

He looked momentarily puzzled. "I'm fine, why?"

"Just checking. While we're here, try to gather some intel on the bidders. I'll handle Estos."

"Understood."

As Nemura and Stefan descended from the carriage, Sloane extended her hand to Mariel. The younger girl's fingers intertwined with Sloane's, their bond evident in the simple gesture. Together, they stepped out, their silhouettes framed by the carriage door, looking every bit the part of mother and daughter.

Except for one being human and the other raithe.

Aila stood a short distance away, flanked by two House Guards. One of them held a small, ornate case—the excerpt reader. Sloane and her group converged with them, their footsteps crunching lightly on the snow-covered cobblestones.

She whispered to Mariel. "Careful, it's slippery."

Mariel rolled her eyes but that hint of a smile was still there.

Greetings went quickly because the entrance to the auction house beckoned, its promise of a warm interior all the more enticing.

The group walked through the large doors and Sloane instinctively shivered. The grandeur of the auction house was clear with its high ceilings, ornate chandeliers, and the soft murmur of the elite in their small groups. Several large hearths heated the spacious room with roaring fires. The atmosphere was thick with anticipation, and every eye seemed to be on Sloane as she made her entrance.

Just inside, Ilian stood conversing with an older sun elf. Spotting Sloane, Ilian's face broke into a warm smile. He stepped forward, enthusiasm evident in his voice. "Lady Reinhart! Welcome, welcome. Today promises to be exciting. May I introduce my uncle, Viscount Estos?" He gestured to the older elf, who nodded in acknowledgment. "Uncle, this is Baroness Reinhart, the one I've told you so much about."

Viscount Estos, with his regal bearing, greeted her warmly. "Baroness Reinhart, I've heard much about your endeavors. I eagerly await the outcome of today, especially given the collaborative venture my nephew has been so fervently advocating."

Translation: This better go well or its his head and we're gonna have issues.

Sloane nodded, her smile gracious. "Thank you, Lord Estos. I'm honored by your interest."

Before she could continue, a well-dressed sun elf man, flanked by two equally elegant women, approached them. "Greetings and welcome to Tath's," he began, his voice smooth and confident. "I am Ser Willec Tath, overseer of these auctions on behalf of my esteemed House. Baroness Reinhart, your

reputation precedes you. We are very excited about your device today. Rosale stands on the brink of a revolution, and we at Tath's are eager to play our part in one of the King's foremost priorities."

Sloane inclined her head in acknowledgment. "Your welcome is much appreciated, Ser Tath." At her gesture, her guard stepped forward, presenting the case to one of the women accompanying Ser Tath.

The knight smiled. "I might add, an agent of His Royal Highness is attending this evening drawn in by the description of what you've promised."

Viscount Estos's eyebrows shot up in surprise, but he remained silent, his expression inscrutable.

Ser Tath then turned his attention back to Viscount Estos, bowing slightly. "Lord Estos, we've prepared the Estos Booth for you. Attendants will be at both your and Lady Reinhart's service should either of you wish to participate in the bidding."

Estos's voice was calm as he thanked the man cordially, but there was a hint of curiosity. "Is the Countess attending?"

"Indeed," Ser Tath replied with a nod. "Such an event as this is not to be missed, even with the weather as it is. And I've been informed that Viscount Sae'ta will be joining us shortly."

With formalities concluded, the second sun elf woman led the group to the Estos Booth. Stefan smoothly slipped out of the group unnoticed by all except Sloane and Nemura.

The booth was strategically positioned, offering an unobstructed view of both the stage below and the large hall with circular tables for the other attendees waiting patiently. The seating arrangement of the booth was as expected, with four plush chairs arranged for optimal viewing with more arranged along the wall behind them. Viscount Estos and his nephew claimed the chairs on the right, while Sloane and Mariel settled into the ones on the left, and Sloane couldn't contain her excitement in actually attending her first fantasy auction.

The atmosphere in the large hall grew more electric as attendees settled into their seats, the soft murmur of conversations filling the air. The soft glow of chandeliers cast a warm light over the room, reflecting off the polished wood and gleaming surfaces.

It was surprising just how packed it was considering it was the middle of winter. It seemed that the nobility of the city craved any entertainment during the season.

Just as the anticipation reached its peak, a striking sun elf woman entered the booth. Her long, dark curly hair cascaded down her back, complimenting beautifully with her rich, dark skin. The gentle crinkling around her vibrant orange eyes revealed a warm smile as she approached Sloane.

“Milords, Miladies,” she greeted with a melodic tone. Holding a platter filled with crystal glasses, she gracefully offered one to each of the booth’s occupants.

Sloane’s eyebrows raised in surprise as she recognized the liquid inside.

Sparkling wine.

A beverage she hadn’t expected to encounter in this world, given its sixteenth century origin on Earth. She accepted the glass, her fingers brushing against the elf’s as she did so. Bringing the glass to her lips, she took a tentative sip. The effervescence danced on her tongue, the taste both familiar and exotic.

It was exquisite.

Beside her, Mariel’s eyes were wide with curiosity. “Let me try!” she whispered, leaning towards Sloane.

Sloane pulled the glass away with a teasing smile. “You’re too young.”

Mariel’s face contorted in mock outrage. “What?!”

“Yes, shush. Mine.”

“But...”

“No alcohol. Not at fourteen.”

Mariel’s groan of frustration was almost drowned out by the soft chuckle from across the booth. Sloane’s gaze shifted to Ilian, who was clearly enjoying the exchange. His eyes sparkled with amusement as he watched the playful banter between Sloane and Mariel.

Sloane shot him a mock scowl, to which he responded with a cheeky smirk.

Ugh.

Before the moment could stretch further, the attention of the hall was drawn to the stage. Ser Willec Tath stepped into the spotlight, his presence commanding the immediate attention of all present. His voice, clear and resonant, filled the hall.

“Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed guests, welcome to Tath’s Auction House. Tonight, we have a selection of items that promise to intrigue and delight. But first, a toast.” He raised his own glass of sparkling wine. “To innovation, to progress, and to the future.”

The room echoed with the clinking of glasses, the atmosphere charged with excitement and then the auction began with a flourish.

Ser Willec introduced each item with practiced ease and charisma. Sloane leaned back in her chair, her eyes scanning the stage as various items were presented. The initial offerings were from various nobles around the city, and while they held some interest, none truly captured her attention.

Oxylus

A sword with faintly glowing runes was the first to be presented. Sloane squinted, trying to discern the quality of the runes. They seemed... weak, rudimentary. Not something she'd be interested in, but perhaps a noble looking for a decorative piece might find it appealing.

Nemura stepped forward and leaned in to whisper after it went for twenty-five gold. A massive profit when the sword itself likely didn't even cost a single gold. "If everything else fails, you can sell your enchanted gear to rich nobles."

Sloane snorted and looked up at the woman who had a grin on her face. "Did you see the runes?"

"Amateurish," Mariel stated sagely. "A pity."

Nemura chuckled and backed away.

Viscount Estos looked over. "You seem quite confident in your abilities."

She wasn't usually one to boast, but this man seemed to come here with some preconceived notions. So she didn't hold back in her self-assessment.

"Absolutely. I've been doing this for two years now. I know what I'm doing, and I was the one who came up with the terminology that the Church now utilizes. House Reinhart boasts a proprietary substance that we use in our enchantments. Our runes will last *years* because we know how to properly do them."

He hummed but turned back as the next item was introduced, quickly followed by others—a beautifully crafted vase, a set of ornate jewelry, and a peculiar-looking statue. All were met with polite applause and modest bidding.

Then, the atmosphere in the room shifted as Ser Willec said they had two remaining items for the evening. A large mana core was unveiled, its colors a swirl of green, blue, and red. Whispers filled the room as Ser Willec explained its origin—retrieved from a massive sea creature off the coast.

The bidding started at ten gold.

Sloane's interest was piqued. Such a core could have numerous applications in both her and Aila's work. Before she could consider her bid, a man whom the senior Lord Estos helpfully identified as Lord Sae'ta with a whisper, seated across the hall, confidently offered twenty gold.

Without hesitation, Sloane gestured to the sun elf attendant beside her, signaling her bid of thirty gold. The attendant raised a baton, drawing Willec's attention and announcing her bid.

Beside her, Viscount Estos turned to look at her, his gaze searching, as if trying to discern her intentions. Then, with a nod to his own attendant, he entered the fray with a bid of forty gold.

The room was alive with energy.

The bids flew fast and furious, each noble trying to outdo the other. Sloane quickly realized the price was skyrocketing beyond what she was willing to pay and withdrew gracefully. The core was valuable, yes, but she had other priorities.

Lord Estos was the next to withdraw, followed not much longer by Lord Sae'ta.

The final bid was a staggering three hundred large gold. A murmur of surprise swept through the room. The winning bid came from a stern-looking individual, who was announced as the representative of the Crown. The sum was exorbitant, even for such a rare item.

Sloane couldn't help but wonder what the Crown had in mind for the exceptional quality core.

Then, the moment Sloane had been waiting for arrived.

A sun elf woman, dressed in a flowing gown that shimmered like the night sky, gracefully carried an ornate case onto the stage. With a flourish, she opened the case, revealing the Reinhart Excerpt Reader. The leather bracer was exquisitely crafted, its sleek glass screen glowing with bright blue runes that seemed to dance in the dim light of the auction hall.

Ser Willec took center stage again, his voice tinged with a palpable excitement. "Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the Reinhart Excerpt Reader. This revolutionary device allows you to view the same Excerpt that the Church provides in their larger temples, but at your own convenience. For those unfamiliar, the Excerpt reveals the changes the gods have bestowed upon you since the Flash. It provides insight into your potential magical abilities and delves into the secrets of your very soul. I should mention that it is the first of its kind to be offered to those outside House Reinhart."

Sloane rolled her eyes at the dramatics.

Yeah, not quite but they're eating it up.

The room's atmosphere grew dense with anticipation as Ser Willec took a moment to let the significance of the item sink in. He then confidently announced, "We shall commence at one hundred large gold."

The chamber's air seemed to freeze. A collective gasp, a mixture of shock and excitement, reverberated off the intricately carved walls and high ceilings. Whispers spread like wildfire, with attendees exchanging glances, trying to gauge each other's intentions. Sloane could feel the weight of the moment pressing on her chest, causing her heart to skip a beat.

Stefan slipped into the room, and Sloane smirked.

She leaned closer to Mariel. "Can you let Aila come sit here for a moment?"

The attendant must have heard her because he quickly helped Aila bring a chair forward and place it next to Mariel's. The director of the Nornport Center was beaming as she kept her eyes focused on the stage.

Oxylus

This was the moment they had been waiting for, the acknowledgment of all their hard work.

It will also set the center up to be flush with money for after we leave soon.

Before the murmurs could die down, Countess Tath, the City Lady and one of only three countesses in the kingdom, stood up. The shimmering fabric of her gown caught the light as she gestured to the attendant with her who confidently declared for her, “One hundred and fifty large gold.”

Ser Willec looked up at his relative and House matriarch with a smile. “Our first bid is from Countess Tath for one-fifty, do I have any...”

The gauntlet was thrown, and the bidding war ignited with a fervor.

Lord Sae'ta countered swiftly, not to be outdone.

After, the attendants were forgotten and the nobles bid for themselves.

Lady Tath, with a glint in her eye, responded in kind.

The Crown Representative, a shadowy figure who had proved to have deep pockets, joined the fray, driving the price even higher. As the bids soared, other attendees, nobles, and merchants alike began to throw their hats into the ring. The room became a battlefield of wills and wealth, with each bid more audacious, more daring than the last. The air was thick with competition, every eye fixed on the prize, every ear tuned to the next bid.

As the bids escalated, Viscount Estos, seated in regal poise beside Sloane, watched the unfolding drama with a growing sense of satisfaction. Each new bid seemed to add another layer of mirth to his eyes.

The rich fabric of his attire seemed to shimmer a bit brighter with every increase. When the bidding reached the staggering sum of five hundred, he turned gracefully towards Sloane, his eyes gleaming with a mix of mischief and pride.

“Baroness,” he began, his voice dripping with anticipation, “it seems our venture is set to be most profitable.”

With a flourish, he raised his glass, the bubbly liquid inside catching the light. Sloane, feeling a rush of gratitude and camaraderie, responded in kind, lifting her second glass of the sparkling wine, its bubbles dancing like her soaring spirits.

Opposite his uncle, Ilian was a picture of elation. His face was flushed, eyes wide and bright, clearly basking in the unfolding success. As whispers filled the room, the viscount leaned towards him to whisper something in his ear.

I bet his stock as heir just went through the roof.

The room's tension ratcheted up another notch when the bids approached the eight-hundred mark. Next to Sloane, Aila's voice betrayed a hint of disbelief as she muttered a curse.

Behind them, Stefan replied with a wry and succinct, "No kidding."

Sloane chuckled.

On the other side of Aila, Mariel was a whirlwind of emotion.

Initially seated at the edge of her chair, she now seemed to hover above it with wide eyes and hands clenched in anticipation. Every new bid sent a jolt through her, her youthful exuberance making her reactions all the more pronounced.

The room's atmosphere grew even more electric as the bids surpassed one thousand. The sea of bidders had now dwindled to just three. And then, with a voice that commanded the room, the Crown Representative called out what would be the final bid: a staggering one thousand two hundred large gold.

The weight of the moment pressed down on Sloane, and she released a breath she hadn't even been aware she was holding. As the hall erupted in a mix of applause and murmurs, her eyes found Aila's. In that shared glance there was a mutual unbridled joy of triumph.

And with this, we can leave safely. Just six more weeks.

We're coming, Gwyn.