
Existential Dread

The grandeur of Countess Tath's manor was evident in every corner, from the intricate tapestries that adorned the walls, to the delicate porcelain they sipped their tea from. Sloane found herself seated at an elongated table whose polished wood reflected the soft glow of the chandeliers above. The Countess, a regal figure with an air of authority, sat at the head of the table, with Sloane to her immediate left. Beside Sloane was Mariel, followed by Ser Liora and Aila. Across from Sloane, the countess's daughter sat with an air of curiosity, along with several other women whose names and titles Sloane hadn't bothered to remember.

After all, we won't be here for long.

However, at the end of that line was one person who she did remember. Ser Gerrald, the knight who had walked through the city with her a while ago. He was a nice guy, although not too talkative right now.

"It is absolutely delightful to meet you, Baroness. I wish we had done this much sooner," Countess Tath remarked, her voice dripping with honeyed politeness.

Sloane offered a gracious smile, her eyes meeting the countess's. "The pleasure is mine, Countess. I too regret that our paths have only just crossed. Thank you for your hospitality."

The older woman's eyes twinkled, a playful smirk forming on her lips. "Oh, please, call me Harue."

Sloane inclined her head slightly, acknowledging the gesture. "In that case, Harue, please call me Sloane." She gestured gracefully down the table, introducing her companions. "This is my daughter, Mariel..."

A ripple of surprise ran through the women opposite, with the countess's own daughter narrowing her eyes in evident disbelief. "She's your... daughter?"

Sloane's gaze sharpened, ready to address the insinuation, but Mariel beat her to it. "It's quite uncanny, isn't it? We look so similar, but I am merely an adopted daughter. My younger sister, however, is the spitting image of our mother."

Countess Tath shot her entourage a stern look, a silent warning that silenced any further murmurs.

Clearing her throat, Sloane continued, "Next, we have Ser Liora Faren, my trusted retainer. She will oversee my House's interests in my absence once we depart in the Spring. And lastly, Director Aila

Iliric, the brilliant mind behind the Reinhart Center of Nornport and a key figure in the development of the Reinhart Excerpt Readers.”

The countess frowned. “I must confess that I am still most displeased that His Majesty was so willing to pay such an obscene price. Tell me they will not be sold for anywhere near that value when they reach the market.”

Sloane shook her head, her gaze unwavering. “We were as taken aback by the bid as anyone. However, while they will be positioned as a luxury item, we are working diligently to ensure something more palatable.” She glanced at Aila, who nodded in agreement. “We anticipate a market launch in a year, with House Estos managing distribution.”

The atmosphere in the room grew palpably tense as the countess leaned forward, her eyes sharp. “Will you be able to match His Majesty’s pricing? I trust you realize he’s probably handing your product over to his terran advisor to replicate it?”

A muffled chuckle could be heard from a few chairs down from Sloane. Aila, her hand covering her mouth, tried to suppress her amusement. “My apologies, Countess,” she said, her voice laced with mirth. “It’s just that the notion of them reverse engineering our device is... amusing. House Reinhart employs proprietary materials that are not available anywhere within Rosale. Moreover, any attempt to break into the reader will render it useless. It’s designed that way.”

Sloane, seizing the moment, leaned in, her voice steady. “Exactly. You’re familiar with the Church’s Ceremony of Paths, aren’t you, Harue?”

The countess nodded, her expression guarded.

“We anticipate that the Church won’t be thrilled if devices like ours become commonplace. From what I’ve learned, they have never been fond of rivals, especially when it comes to influencing the populace.”

Whispers erupted from the other side of the table, but the countess remained unfazed. “So, the premium pricing is strategic since the Church tends to overlook the indulgences of the aristocracy. Clever, Sloane. Clever.” The countess frowned for a moment then seemed to make up her mind. “But tell me, if I were to express interest in acquiring one of these devices, could an arrangement be made? House Tath would find itself in a small debt to you.”

Sloane exchanged a quick glance with Aila, who subtly gestured towards Mariel. She knew what her high elf friend was referencing. Turning her attention back to the countess, she proposed, “How about a trade, Harue? I will provide you with one, in exchange for your endorsement and partnership with us for *another* product of ours. I’ve heard that House Tath has a vast network spanning various trades.”

Oxylus

A sly smile graced the countess's lips. "Indeed. House Tath is renowned for its tailoring, leatherworking, and blacksmithing. We believe in the art of self-expression, be it through fashion or armor."

Sloane gestured to Mariel. "Could you place your satchel on the table, dear?"

Mariel's almond-shaped eyes widened in understanding, a mischievous glint appearing within them. "Of course, mother," she drawled, her voice dripping with feigned innocence. She unhooked the hip satchel from her waist and placed it on the table with a flourish.

The women exchanged glances, their expressions a mix of curiosity and amusement. One of them, Sloane noticed, was biting her lip, clearly suppressing a chuckle.

The countess's daughter, her nose slightly upturned, remarked, "It's... quaint. I mean, charming, in a rustic sort of way."

Sloane couldn't help but chuckle, covering her mouth with her hand. "You said the exact same thing when you first saw it!" she said to Mariel, her eyes twinkling with mirth.

Mariel giggled in response, her freckled, grey cheeks flushing in a cute purple color. "Should I do the honors?"

"By all means."

The room's atmosphere grew thick with anticipation. As Mariel reached into the satchel and pulled out a large bronze statue, the room fell into stunned silence. The sheer impossibility of the act left many mouths agape and eyes bulged.

The moment was, in a word, glorious.

And then, breaking the silence, Ser Gerrald burst into hearty laughter. His infectious mirth rippled through the room, pulling everyone from their stunned reverie. Sloane couldn't help but smile, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

"That is why all of this magic stuff is amazing," Ser Gerrald exclaimed, pointing at the satchel with an appreciative nod. "It's just so nifty! Oh, I can't wait until the capital gets a load of you."

"My mother *is* quite special," Mariel stated confidently.

Sloane felt a warmth spread through her chest, her heart full of pride for her daughter. She squeezed Mariel's hand gently in response.

Harue, trying to maintain her composed demeanor, couldn't help but let a smirk play on her lips. "Thank you, Ser Gerrald, for that... commentary," she said, her tone betraying her amusement. It was clear she shared his sentiment.

Sloane didn't want to dawdle in the capital, though.

She cleared her throat, drawing the attention back to her. “This is merely our prototype, the very first of what is to come.” She paused and glanced at Mariel who was beaming. *Yeah, you got spoiled.* “Our vision is to collaborate with House Tath to design both stylish and practical containers. These will employ magic to offer more internal space than their external dimensions suggest. This isn't just a product; it's a revolution. While House Estos will manage distribution, House Tath's expertise can elevate this venture, ensuring prosperity for all three of our Houses.”

The countess leaned back, her posture relaxed but her eyes sharp and calculating. “May I inspect it?” she inquired, extending a graceful hand towards the satchel.

Sloane nodded, grateful she'd had the foresight to ask Mariel to remove her personal items. *Explaining a collection of bones would have been... awkward.*

For the next several minutes, the countess meticulously examined the satchel, testing its limits and capacities. By the time she finished, she had sent her daughter *sprinting* to get the House esquire.

Beside Sloane, Ser Liora and Aila exchanged impressed glances. Once the esquire returned, the group had spent almost the remainder of the afternoon discussing business. After which, she and Harue discussed what Sloane would do in the capital before giving her a bit of inside information on who Harue called the Quirky Terran Woman.

Sloane just wanted to leave, but they still had a few weeks to go.



The cold air nipped at Sloane's cheeks as she stepped through the grand gates of the Tath Estate. The cobblestone path before her glistened with patches of ice, remnants of the snow that had been diligently cleared away. She trod cautiously, keenly aware of the treacherous spots that threatened to send her slipping.

Beside her, Mariel's youthful exuberance was evident. The girl paused, casting a sidelong glance at an empty spot next to Sloane, her lips curling into a knowing smile. “Alright, you can come out now,” she called out, her voice echoing slightly in the crisp air.

A bending of light and reality later, Vesper materialized. Sloane smirked as the sudden appearance no longer even startled Ser Liora.

Mariel's gaze darted around, searching. “Where's our carriage?” she inquired, her breath forming small clouds in the cold.

Sloane pointed down the road where a familiar carriage was making its way towards them. “It’s coming,” she assured. Turning to Liora and Aila, she continued, “You two should take the carriage. Mariel and I fancy a walk. I’d like to stop by the market.”

Liora’s brow furrowed with concern. “My lady, are you certain? Perhaps I or one of the guards should accompany you?”

Sloane waved off her concerns with a gentle smile. “We’ll be alright. We have Vesper, after all.” *And my Caster.* Her gaze shifted to Mariel, who was already clambering onto Vesper’s back, nestling comfortably between her appendages. She rolled her eyes. “Mariel, what are you... Oh, forget it.”

Aila’s eyes softened, gratitude evident in her gaze. “Thank you, Sloane. Take care.”

The moment the two women stepped away, Sloane turned her attention to Mariel, her eyes scanning the girl’s attire. “Warm enough?” she asked, her voice tinged with a motherly concern.

Mariel’s lips curled into a playful smile, her cheeks rosy from the cold. “Absolutely!” she exclaimed, exhaling dramatically to watch her breath fog up in the chilly air. “So, the market, right?”

Sloane nodded, her gaze drifting down the bustling streets. “Yes, and we need to find a courier. Spring’s almost upon us, after all.”

The trio drew the attention of many as Sloane, Mariel, and the golem made their way through the streets. The city’s heart pulsed with life, but even in the midst of the surprisingly busy crowd, they stood out. Whispers and murmurs followed their path, fingers discreetly pointing in their direction.

Sloane found herself amused as she caught what people were saying.

She was recognized by more than a few.

Mariel, perched proudly atop Vesper, seemed to revel in the attention. Her posture was straight, her chin lifted, and her eyes sparkled with mischief. The sight of the young girl confidently astride the golem was a spectacle that those around them seemed to eat up.

As they continued, Sloane’s gaze lingered on Mariel. The scene tugged at a memory, pulling her back to a sun-drenched day in a small Italian town hosting a festival. Gwyn, her hair tousled by the wind, had been perched on a real horse, her small hands gripping the saddle tightly, but with a big smile on her face. A woman had walked alongside, guiding the mare with a reassuring touch. Sloane had been there, camera in hand, capturing every precious moment of her daughter’s joy.

This year they had even planned on letting Gwyn take some horseback riding lessons the summer after school ended. A summer that never came.

Mariel’s voice, tinged with a hint of worry, pulled Sloane from her reverie. “Mother?” The young girl’s eyes, wide and searching, met Sloane’s.

Sloane offered a reassuring smile, though it didn’t reach her eyes. “Yes, sweetie?”

“Are you alright?”

Pushing aside the memories that had momentarily clouded her thoughts, Sloane nodded, her gaze drifting to the sign ahead. The wooden plaque, bearing the emblem of the courier's guild, swayed gently in the breeze. “I'm fine. Look,” she said, pointing, “that's where we need to be.”

As they approached the guild's entrance, Mariel gracefully dismounted Vesper. The moment they stepped inside, the bustling atmosphere of the guild enveloped them. Sloane's eyes narrowed slightly at the sight of the queue.

Even in winter, this city never slows down.

A sharp voice cut through the hum of conversations. “Oi! That thing's too big for in here. It needs to stay outside!” One of the two people at the counter was looking at her. The man's tone was brusque, and Sloane's gaze met his, her eyebrow arching in silent challenge.

But she had to admit, he had a point.

She turned to Vesper, her voice softening. “Wait outside, please, girl.”

Vesper's response, a throaty meow, was almost comical, and Mariel held the door open for the golem.

As they settled back into the line, a telv man, his eyes alight with curiosity, remarked, “That creature is truly fascinating. I've just made it here from Calling, and while there are wonders there, nothing quite compares to that.”

Sloane's attention was momentarily diverted by a sun elf merchant ahead, his voice raised in frustration as he argued with the receptionist about delays. The man was complaining about how he couldn't wait another two weeks, his business needed to go now.

But processing the telv man's words drew her back. “Oh? We'll be heading to Calling soon,” Sloane replied, her voice tinged with curiosity. “I'm eager to see what the city has to offer.”

The merchant's complaints grew louder, and Sloane's ears picked up on his impatience before he was told he could pay for a priority delivery once the routes opened. That gave Sloane a better feeling that she'd be able to hire someone. She didn't need someone to leave immediately, just when able.

The merchant left in a huff, and the receptionist called up the telv man in front of Sloane.

He smiled politely back at Sloane. “You'll enjoy it, I'm sure. They're quite excited about inventors like you.”

Mariel looked up at Sloane, her eyes wide with anticipation. “I wonder what we'll get to see there. We'll have to be quick, though. Are we going by sea after?”

Sloane nodded. “Yes, after we convince you know who. We’ll head to a port town southeast of the capital.”

Mariel’s face lit up. “Great.” Her expression shifted, her brows furrowing as if she were concentrating on something else. “Uh, Mom?”

Sloane’s attention was drawn to the telv man at the counter. “...Yes, I came from Calling. I understand there are restrictions, but my clients in Marketbol paid extra. I took on the request of my own volition. I am permitted...”

The telv man leaned in toward the receptionist, his posture a blend of frustration and urgency. “Look, I just need help finding the recipient of my delivery,” he insisted, his voice tinged with a note of desperation.

The receptionist, a young sun elf with an air of bureaucratic indifference, looked up from her ledger. “You *and* your recipient are not part of the Rosalian Guild registry. This is your first time in Rosale, correct? And you’re looking for a non-citizen.”

“That shouldn’t matter,” the man retorted, his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

The receptionist sighed, her eyes scanning the room as if seeking managerial intervention. “I’m afraid it does matter, mister. Guild regulations within the kingdom are clear on—”

The man exhaled sharply, cutting her off. “Listen, my recipient is a noble. Her House is sending time-sensitive information. She was supposed to be in Calling, but she isn’t there. I’ve searched everywhere, and this is where she was supposed to arrive in your kingdom.”

Sloane’s ears perked up at the mention of a noble and time-sensitive information.

The receptionist looked visibly conflicted, caught between the rigidity of guild rules and the urgency in the man’s voice. Finally, she seemed to make a decision.

“Alright, I’ll see what I can do,” she said, her voice softer now, as she began flipping through a stack of parchments on her desk. “But I can’t make any promises.”

The telv man’s shoulders sagged in relief, his face softening for the first time since he’d stepped up to the counter. “Thank you. That’s all I’m asking for.”

Sloane felt a nudge from Mariel, who had been watching the scene unfold with equal interest. “That was intense,” Mariel whispered.

She nodded and watched the exchange with keen interest as the woman got up and went into another room without a word. A few minutes later, she came back out with an apologetic look.

“I’m sorry, there are no House Reinharts registered with the guild here in Nornport,” the receptionist replied.

Sloane startled in surprise.

He said he came from Marketbol—

“Alos’s wrinkled prick! Seriously?! You’re looking for House Reinhart?”

Mom mode activated, instantly jerking her into motion. Her head swiveled slowly and she frowned down at Mariel. “Language, young lady. That is not the way we speak in public.”

Mariel’s eyes widened but then Sloane turned to the receptionist and the telv courier. “What the fuck?”

“Mom!”

Sloane just shook her head. Her daughter sighed and mumbled in what was clearly an attempt to mimic Sloane, “*Do as I say and not as I do, Mar.*”

The receptionist and the telv looked at the two of them with confusion.

Sloane tilted her head. “Uhm, I’m Baroness Sloane Reinhart. Are you looking for me?”

Both receptionist and courier shared a look before a massive exhale of relief came from the telv man. He tapped the counter twice and thanked the receptionist before turning away from the counter. He stepped forward, his eyes locked onto Sloane’s.

“You’re the one I’ve been searching for,” he said, his voice filled with disbelief. “I’ve traveled through cities and towns, dodged frontlines of a war and scouting parties, faced countless obstacles, fought monsters, and now...” He sighed, a weary thing, one that spoke of a long journey fraught with danger. “It took so long but I was determined to find you. If you weren’t here, I would have had to return to Marketbol and report my failure.”

He stood straighter. “Lady Reinhart? I come bearing word from Marketbol. Ser Ernard Morin and Miss Elodie Romaris from your holdings there paid substantially for my services.”

Sloane was dumbfounded. “When did you leave?”

“I left Marketbol over a year ago.”

She’d been stuck in Swanbrook for around a year. That meant he left not long after they did. *I barely missed finding out about Gwyn...* She wanted to curse and get angry, but she just couldn’t. But still, this man that didn’t even know her... For him to be searching for so long? She could only reply in one way.

“What?”

Mariel’s fingers intertwined with hers and squeezed Sloane’s hand tight, her own surprise mirrored in her wide eyes. “This is... unexpected.”

Oxylus

The telv man nodded, his gaze never leaving Sloane's. "Very unexpected. But perhaps, also very fortunate. Now, do you have somewhere private? I think that would be best."

Sloane nodded absently, her mind racing as she tried to figure out what message Elodie and Ernard could have sent. "Yeah, let's go back to my manor."

She glanced at the receptionist. "I'll have one of my people ensure you know how to contact me in the future."

The woman's head bobbed.



The trio, trailed by the ever-watchful Vesper, made their way through the elegant wrought-iron gates of the Reinhart manor. The sprawling estate was a testament to the Reinhart family's legacy and influence. The gardens, even in the chill of winter, were meticulously maintained, with dormant trees and shrubs awaiting the touch of spring.

Sloane instantly saw the moving mountain walking over from the area used for training. Nemura, her armor glinting in the waning sunlight, frowned as she saw them. Her brow furrowed further as she took in the unfamiliar face of the courier. "Who's this?"

"Courier from Marketbol, Ser," the man replied promptly, his posture straightening slightly under Nemura's scrutinizing gaze.

Mariel couldn't help but let out a snicker at the man's formality, earning her a playful nudge from Sloane. "Come on, sweaty," Sloane teased, addressing Nemura, who was still wiping away the sheen of perspiration from her brow. "Let's see what Elodie has for us."

The group made their way into the manor, and through the hall to the parlor where a small flame in the fireplace cast a warm, inviting glow across the room.

Once inside, Sloane turned to face the courier, her demeanor shifting from playful to businesslike. "Alright, now that we're away from prying eyes, what do you have for me?"

Without a word, the courier reached into a leather pouch and produced a scroll, sealed with a wax emblem Sloane recognized all too well. "I was instructed to advise you to sit before reading this," he said, his voice solemn. "And to remain nearby should you wish to send a response."

Sloane's eyebrows knitted together in concern. The courier's words, combined with the familiar seal, set off alarm bells in her mind. Without waiting for a response, the man retreated, leaving the room in tense silence.

Nemura and Mariel's gazes were fixed on the scroll, their expressions a mix of curiosity and apprehension. Nemura let out a nervous chuckle, trying to break the tension. "Well, that was ominous as fuck. Are you going to open it?"

Sloane hesitated for a moment, her fingers trembling as they touched the seal. "Yeah, I'm not sitting for this," she muttered, more to herself than anyone else. Taking a deep, steadying breath, she broke the seal and began to read. As her eyes scanned the words, they seemed to blur together, each sentence heavier than the last. A cold, sinking feeling settled in the pit of her stomach, making it hard to breathe.

The scroll slipped from her grasp, the weight of its contents too much to bear, and it fluttered to the ground like a wounded bird. Sloane felt her knees buckle, and a choked sob threatened to escape her lips.

Nemura was by her side in an instant. Her strong arms wrapped around Sloane, holding her upright. "Talk to me," she urged, her voice laced with concern. "What is it? Are they okay?"

Sloane's eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "M-My baby," she managed to whisper, her voice breaking.

Before Sloane could elaborate, Mariel, having swiftly picked up the fallen letter, read out the heart-wrenching news, her voice quivering with emotion. "My sister's House... it's in the Duchy of Tiloral."

Nemura's gaze locked onto Sloane's, her eyes filled with that determination and loyalty the woman showed without any care in the world. "We'll find her," she promised. "Whatever it takes."

Sloane nodded, drawing strength from Nemura's words. She took a shaky breath, her voice barely audible as she whispered, "And now... we know where to start."

She sucked in a breath.

Nemura, sensing the imminent emotional breakdown, gently guided Sloane to the floor. As they settled, the dam of emotions Sloane had been holding back finally broke, and she began to sob uncontrollably. The weight of the news, combined with the stress of the past weeks, was too much to bear alone.

Mariel, her youthful face streaked with tears, quickly joined them on the floor. The two curled protectively around Sloane, their arms wrapping around her in a comforting embrace. The room was filled with the heart-wrenching sounds of Sloane's grief, but she wasn't alone.

Nemura whispered soothing words into Sloane's ear, her voice a soft balm against the rawness of her emotions. "We're here, Sloane. You're not alone. We'll get through this together."

Mariel, with the innocence and fierce determination of her young age, pressed her forehead against Sloane's, her tears mingling with her mother's. "We'll find her, mom. I promise."

Sloane felt the weight of the moment, the tears flowing freely now—tears of overwhelming relief, joy, and gratitude. Gratitude for the unwavering love and support that enveloped her, even in her most vulnerable moments.

She wasn't sure how long they sat like that. Eventually, she sucked in a breath as she fought to regain herself. After what felt like an eternity, Sloane took a shuddering breath, trying to compose herself. She pulled both Mariel and Nemura into a tight embrace. "Thank you. Both of you."

Mariel, with a soft smile, pulled back just enough to plant a tender kiss on Sloane's cheek. Almost simultaneously, Nemura leaned over, pressing a gentle kiss to the top of Sloane's head.

Fresh tears welled up in Sloane's eyes. "What did I ever do to deserve you two?"

Mariel looked deep into Sloane's eyes, her own shimmering with emotion. "You loved me, unconditionally. That's all I ever needed."

Nemura nodded in agreement. "You gave us a home, loyalty, a family. You've been our anchor, Sloane. We're just returning the favor." She squeezed Sloane's hand reassuringly, a silent promise that they would always be there for her, no matter what.

Sloane smiled. "Then let's get to work."



Spring's arrival came quickly, and with its arrival, Sloane found herself submerged in a whirlwind of tasks. The past fortnight had been a blur of preparations. Stefan had seamlessly transitioned his responsibilities to Ser Liora, and Sloane had entrusted Aila with the metaphorical baton of the Center. Both Stefan and Nemura were now equipped with enchanted armor and weapons. Opting for practicality over luxury, they had chosen a sturdy covered wagon for their journey. Sloane was well-stocked with grenades, cartridges for her caster, and had even configured Nemura's personal reader to communicate with Tiberius.

But as always, nature had its own plans.

The manor echoed with the rumble of thunder, its windows revealing the tempest outside. Inside, the dining hall was a haven of warmth and light. Sloane, Aila, and Liora were engrossed in a discussion, finalizing the last details before setting off post-storm. While Stefan and Nemura spoke quietly on the opposite side of the table.

Aila's voice broke the rhythm of their conversation. "Will you return, Sloane?"

Liora's face showed a hint of curiosity and watched Sloane for her reply.

Sloane hesitated, her gaze distant. "I'm not certain. Our priority is Gwyn. I don't know what the plan is after that. We need somewhere safe, but that courier talked about the monsters in the center of the kingdom. That's going to be something we have to worry about."

Nemura chimed in, "The royal army is trying, but the monsters are relentless. They've all but overwhelmed the central forests and the western shores."

Sloane exhaled deeply. "That complicates things. But perhaps it's a chance for us to level up."

Nemura's lips twitched into a smirk. "Opportunities indeed."

Sloane turned back to Aila. "I will keep in touch. Don't worry. When we get settled down somewhere, we'll figure everything out. I left you with the instructions for everything I have so far. Including the silden ink."

Aila nodded. "Yeah, I'm going to send missives to Director Merbaker. I'd like to have us simply import the ink from them as much as possible. If we start importing the plant itself, that may cause issues."

Ser Liora joined in, "I've caught two spies so far trying to get access to our inventions. I will be working with Director Iliric to increase security precautions among our entire staff both within the House and the Center."

"Good. I trust you two will get it done. Aila? You've done so much. I have to admit, I was a bit worried how you'd do."

Aila's expression fell slightly, but she recovered. "That's... understandable. I was not in a good place, then. But you've given me a new chance at life. I won't let you down, Sloane. We have so many good things that can come from this. I have so many ideas."

Sloane chuckled. "Oh, I know you do. Have you looked at my designs of the Archive device I made in Marketbol?"

"Actually, that is something I wanted to talk to you about before you left. I have some ideas of how to improve upon what you started. But for now," she reached into her spatial satchel and pulled out a small, thin tablet-looking device. "Here. I made what I'm calling a slate for you."

She slid it down the table and Mariel grabbed it, passing it to Sloane.

Sloane looked at the tablet and smiled. Aila surprised her every day. The woman was absolutely brilliant, and she had taken her notes and made it a reality.

"Will it connect to the Archive?"

“I have to send some instructions to Director Merbaker for some modifications they will need to do, but give it a few seasons, and yes. The slate will let you know when we get it up and running. I’m... excited for what it means.”

“It means we don’t have to worry about sending missives or letters, or anything else. We can message each other with this,” Sloane said, gesturing to the slate.

Aila smiled fondly. “Yes. That’s why I worked so hard on it. I’ve... I’m going to miss working with you, Sloane. These past two seasons have done so much for me, and I really want to thank you for the opportunity you’ve given me.”

“Hey, don’t—”

“She’s right, Sloane. You’ve given so much to all of us,” Nemura interjected.

Stefan nodded next to her and Mariel reached over, sliding her hand into Sloane’s. “She’s right, Mother. You’re amazing. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise,” she said, adding a wink at the end.

Sloane chuckled and looked around at everyone at the table, her eyes misting. “Thank you, all of you. I really don’t think I deserve you. You’ve been unbelievably patient and supportive. I really appreciate it.” She turned back to Aila. “I’m happy to have met you, Aila. I am glad to have made a true friend here who finds joy in the same things I do. I’ll make sure to have tons of notes and things ready for you to peruse once you get the Iliric Archive up and running.”

Aila gasped. “The...” A broad smile bloomed on her face. “Thank you, Sloane. I won’t let you down.”

“I know you won’t.”

The researcher-turned-friend turned and looked at everyone. “So, you’ll leave tomorrow?”

Stefan nodded. “Yes, everything is ready.” He looked over at Ser Liora. “Liora, it has been a pleasure working with you. I know the House will be left in good hands.”

The telv woman flushed slightly. “You’re not so bad yourself. For a Blade.”

Sloane’s brow raised as she looked at the two. *Did they?* She saw a slight curling on Stefan’s lip.

They totally did.

She turned to Liora. “You have everything you need from me, correct?”

The woman jerked slightly. “Y–Yes, milady. We’re well prepared to take over operations once you depart. Stefan was an amazing help in that regard.”

“I bet he was,” she said giving the woman a wink. She looked over at the man. “Maybe you two can go over last-minute details tonight. Take all the time you need. No rush.”

Liora’s blush deepened. “That—”

Stefan chuckled. "I think I have a few final things in mind, Liora. We'll need to make sure Aila builds a slate for every House Steward as well. It will be crucial in... maintaining communication."

Oh, he's sly.

Liora smiled softly. "I agree."

Aila looked between the two, completely oblivious. "I can do that. Absolutely. I'll send... three slates to Marketbol with our own escort."

"Sounds good. Reach out to Adaega, I think the courier seemed interested in joining the House full-time. He told me what all he went through to get here, and it was certainly something. Having him as the person to make deliveries would be ideal."

"I will do so." She looked down at the drink that sat in front of her. "This is it, isn't it?"

Sloane frowned. "Yeah..."

Their conversation was interrupted by the abrupt entrance of a guard. His face was pale, his voice urgent. "Milady, there's a squad of paladins at the gate."

Sloane and Mariel exchanged a glance, their expressions mirroring each other's sudden dread. "Damn it." Sloane's voice was sharp. "What do they want?"

"They demand to speak with you. Immediately."

Sloane's eyes hardened. "Bring them in. Then, ensure the guards find safety. We'll handle this."

Nemura and Stefan got up.

The raithe man started pulling his blades from his spatial bag while Nemura started pulling her armor out from her own spatial backpack. Vesper's appendages extended and started glowing.

Stefan let out a resigned sigh. "I can't say I didn't see this coming," he said as he started pulling some armor on before turning and helping Nemura tighten her own.

Sloane shot him a wry look. "Desk duty has made you soft."

His smirk was sly as his daggers seemed to become a bit harder to perceive. "Perhaps."

Ser Liora's voice was tinged with confusion. "Milady, what business do you have with the Church? I don't mean to press... but..." She gestured to the other two retainers clearly preparing for a fight.

Sloane sighed as she stood up and started gathering her own things. "Mariel is a former priestess-in-training. We were asked to escort her to Calling before we left Marketbol. That was a long time ago at this point and Mariel and I have realized that we don't want her to leave us."

Liora's realization was evident. "She's your... Ah. I see. Damn," the woman said before she got up and pulled her own sword out. "Never fought a paladin before..."

Nemura chuckled, her eyes gleaming with mischief. "I had a feeling you'd fit right in, Ser Liora. Just follow my lead."

The woman gave Nemura a searching look and then nodded.

Beside her, Mariel's satchel seemed to come alive.

Bones surged forth like a torrent, swirling around the young woman in a mesmerizing dance. Within moments, they coalesced into a formidable suit of armor, encasing Mariel in its protective and predatory embrace. The room's ambiance shifted as shadows, dark and sinuous, emanated from the bone armor, culminating in the formation of a solid bone spear in her grasp.

The transformation was both eerie and awe-inspiring.

Sloane heard Liora gasp, but her eyes were on Mariel. She looked so amazing. Her instincts warred with her to keep her safe, but knew that would be the wrong choice here. Perhaps by seeing Mariel's defiance, they could head off any fight.

Nemura let out an appreciative chuckle. "Impressive, boney. You and I, we're sparring when the storm lets up, or maybe we can move the table and do it in here."

Mariel's exasperated groan was almost comical. "Why does everything with you lead to a spar?"

Nemura's rich laughter echoed in the room, a brief moment of levity in the tense atmosphere.

Aila, her face a mask of determination, picked up a knife from the table as she stood. "My magic might not be of much use, but I can still help."

She approached Liora, her hand outstretched towards the knight's sword.

After a brief hesitation, Liora handed it over. With deft fingers, Aila traced a runic spell on the blade, infusing it with mana. The sword began to glow ever so slightly. "This enchantment will last a bell or two at most. It should help."

She then turned to Sloane, her expression a mix of resolve and apprehension. "Where do you want me?"

Sloane's eyes met Aila's. "Stay behind us, Aila. This isn't your fight."

Aila's voice was firm. "Aredd lost his life. I wasn't there for him, and maybe I couldn't have changed the outcome. But I won't stand by and abandon the only friend I have."

Sloane felt her heart swell at the comment, but then Liora moved closer to Aila, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "If we make it through this, Aila, know that you've found a friend in me."

Aila's eyes shimmered with gratitude. "Thank you, Liora."

Stefan, ever the pragmatist, interjected, "As heartwarming as this is, we need to stay focused."

Mariel, her voice muffled slightly by her bone helmet, retorted, "Mood killer."

Stefan smirked, "Just because you're donning that fearsome facade doesn't mean I've forgotten the squeaky teenager beneath."

Mariel's voice was mockingly indignant. "Is this about the mouse?"

Before Stefan could retort, and likely bring up the hilarious incident involving a bone mouse in his bed, Sloane cleared her throat, drawing their attention back to the pressing matter at hand.

Sloane's smile was a thin, dangerous curve as she deftly drew her caster, its metallic sheen catching the dim light of the room. The weight of it in her hand was reassuring.

The heavy doors of the room swung open with a sense of foreboding, revealing Praetor Laum and a squad of six paladins. Laum held his helmet at his side and their red armor would have been an imposing sight if the men hadn't been positively drenched.

Laum's confident stride faltered ever so slightly as he took in the scene before him. The room was a tableau of readiness, each individual poised for combat. His eyes darted from one prepared stance to another, gauging the situation.

The Praetor's eyes, sharp and assessing, settled on Mariel, taking in the grim spectacle of her bone armor.

A shadow of discomfort passed over his face before he turned his gaze to Sloane. "We didn't come here with intentions of conflict, nor to wrench her away from you," he said, his voice carrying a note of weariness. He then addressed Mariel directly, "Is that you, Priestess-in-training Lunaris?"

Mariel's glowing eyes could be seen through the slit of her helmet as they darted to Sloane, seeking guidance. With a subtle nod from the baroness, Mariel responded.

The intricate bone helmet she wore began to disassemble, the pieces shifting and integrating into other parts of her armor. Now, her face was visible, and it bore an expression of fierce determination. "I am Mariel *Reinhardt*. I have no intention of returning."

Laum's eyes closed momentarily as if processing her words. When they opened, there was a resigned acceptance. "If that's your stance, then so be it." He shifted his attention back to Sloane. "I've received updates from Dawn's Rise. They're dispatching a strike legion here, then moving towards Swanbrook to confront the cult." His gaze flicked to Mariel, "I've also been informed from Shalas, vaguely, about your mission and the... rumors regarding you. I believe the people were mistaken, you have simply been blessed with magic that complements your inner path."

Sloane's frown deepened.

Laum turned to Sloane and continued, “But unless you've formally initiated her adoption, she remains a ward of the Church. And you won't secure that adoption without the endorsement of a high priest from the order you're supposed to escort her to in Calling.”

Before Sloane could interject, Laum raised a hand, preempting her. “However, given Mariel's own fierce desire and the... unique circumstances,” he said, his eyes briefly resting on Mariel's bone armor, “I'd suggest you approach the high priestess of the *temple* in Calling. She's known to have a soft spot for wayward souls. Though, Mariel will need to advocate for herself.”

Mariel's nod was firm, her resolve evident.

Sloane, though, was still confused. “But why are you here? And with an entire squad of paladins?”

Laum's posture straightened, and he saluted Sloane, a gesture so unexpected it left her momentarily stunned.

He signaled to one of the paladins, a woman, who stepped forward and removed her helmet.

Her voice, when she spoke, was filled with reverence. “I am Evocati Nell. Word from Empyrea City has reached us. First, the Archpriestess extends her blessing and well wishes. My squad and I are here as a service to your daughter: Honored One, The First Mage, and Princess of House Reinhart. Queen Reinhart, we understand the reasoning for your subterfuge in this war torn region and will escort you safely to your destination. Your daughter currently studies at the Royal Academy of Avira and is waiting for you with members of her House. While she's garnered both powerful allies and deadly adversaries, she's under the staunch protection of the Family and their children. Your daughter has been pivotal in learning about this new reality and is key to its future. Alos's Holy Order has been tasked with the protection of all Honored Ones. She has paladins dedicated to her safety, ready to lay down their lives for her—the first paladins to have been pledged solely to a royal House in our Order's entire history. Let us help you reunite with her. I have more, but it can wait until we are on the road.”

Sloane's mind raced, trying to process the flood of information. The room seemed to spin.

They knew where Gwyn was *exactly*. She had allies, she had... enemies. But one of the most powerful entities in this world was on her side.

Wait... they called Gwyn a princess.

Did she call me a queen?

“What the fuck?” she finally managed, her voice a mix of disbelief and shock.



In the distant Kingdom of Avira, two teenagers were sitting together in their room, one reading a juicy story about knights and love, the other sketching what she saw.

Gwyn cried out in surprise, her charcoal fell as a hand jerked up to the side of her head. Tingles shot down her spine that made her squeak.

“Gwyn? What’s wrong?” Roslyn’s voice was laced with worry as she glanced up from her book. Her eyes, full of concern, sought her friend’s.

Rubbing at her ear, the princess grimaced, making sure her **[Draco-Pyromancy]** was not the cause. “My ear... It’s burning something fierce. Ouch.”

Roslyn’s brows knit together in a look of concern. “Are you okay?”

With a nod, Gwyn shivered, her eyes darting around the dorm room as if expecting to find a source for her discomfort. “Do you feel that?”

“What?”

Gwyn hesitated, trying to put words to the sensation. “I don’t know, I have a really bad sense of dread. Existential dread. It’s overwhelming.”

Suppressing a giggle, Roslyn teased, “Don’t be so dramatic.”

She went back to her book, but Gwyn’s unease lingered. She shivered one last time before taking a deep breath and centering herself. Reaching down, she retrieved her fallen charcoal, ensuring her sketch’s subject was back in the correct position. As her hand resumed its dance across the paper, her eyes darting up at her friend across from her, a thought flitted through her mind.

That felt like when I get in trouble with mom. I wonder how shes doing.