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## True Nature of Mana

As Aila led them into the shop itself, Sloane had to gingerly move around clutter and boxes. She gently pointed out things Mariel almost stepped on so the kid wouldn't accidentally trip on anything. Vesper moved about with the assuredness of a cat, prowling around things or even hopping over boxes if she so desired.

When the woman had said clutter, Sloane had expected something more... Normal.

*Is she a boarder?*

There were crates stacked everywhere. They were filled with documents, scrolls, and various household items that seemed out of place in a workshop dedicated to magical research.

Aila followed Sloane's gaze and sighed. "Those are the remnants of Aredd's estate. After he... died, I had to sort through his belongings. I moved some of his personal items to my home and sold others to cover the costs of his burial and other expenses, along with expenses for our work. The rest ended up here."

Sloane could hear the sadness in Aila's voice as they continued to a large room in the back. "I'm sorry for your loss, Aila. It must have been difficult to go through his things."

Aila nodded, her eyes distant. "It was. Aredd was more than just a colleague; he was a mentor and a friend. He believed in our research when no one else did. He supported me, encouraged me, and challenged me to push the boundaries of what was possible. His loss was a blow to the work we were doing and to me personally."

Sloane nodded. "I understand how you feel. I've lost someone close to me as well. It's never easy."

Aila looked at Sloane, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "Thank you, Lady Reinhart. Your understanding means a lot."

Sloane gave Aila a reassuring smile. "Of course. But please, call me 'Sloane'. Now, let's focus on your research."

Aila wiped her eyes and nodded, her determination returning. "Sloane. Yes. You're right. Let's get started."

The interior of the room was a stark contrast to the rest of the small structure. It was a veritable treasure trove of magical experimentation. Tables were laden with various instruments, from wands

and staves to more obscure devices that Sloane couldn't immediately identify. Aila had transformed the space into a dedicated workshop for her research on mana and its applications.

As they stepped into the room, Aila showed Mariel to a seat where she could wait. She almost immediately pulled out a notebook and quill before looking up expectantly at her and Aila.

The sight made Sloane smile.

Then... nothing. Aila seemed a bit lost on where to begin and Sloane was beginning to think that the scholar's partner was the one that handled all of the social interaction.

"Aila?"

"Hmm?"

"What would you like to show me first? You seem to have a plethora of items here that you're working on."

"Oh! So much. I have so many ideas and—and..." she started looking through her papers and Sloane heard her curse under her breath followed by, "Where did he put..." and, "...Ugh he left without sorting this..."

Sloane wasn't sure who she was talking about, but based on the colorful language, it didn't appear to be the research partner, but maybe another co-worker or subordinate of some sort.

Looking around, there were so many items in the cramped location, she could imagine the woman had previously used a larger space.

"Aila?"

The woman's head jerked toward Sloane and she dropped her papers. She looked extremely flustered, so Sloane gave her a warm smile. "It's alright. I'm not going anywhere. How long have you been in this building?"

The woman's brows shot up. "You can tell?"

Sloane nodded. "Yes."

"Ugh! Yes, sorry... I've been here for a few weeks now. My last assistant left right after. I paid him to help me move everything and then he left. I just..."

She looked like she was on the verge of crying. "I just need to do this."

That was the only answer Sloane needed to hear. She stepped around and started looking at the various projects and items. Trying to find something that stood out so she could maybe direct the woman a bit.

So many items were in various states of completion. One appeared to be a press of some sort but was overly bulky like it would be used to flatten steel. It had a *large* red core, and looked like it was... Sloane looked closer, there was bread sticking out of it.

*A fucking industrial panini press?*

Sloane shook her head and kept looking around. After satisfying her curiosity by checking out a few other random assorted contraptions that seemed to draw mana through cores, Sloane's eyes were drawn to a peculiar device on one of the tables. It consisted of a metal cuff attached to a small crystal orb, flanked by three small blue cores. It was strange and almost looked like one of those blood pressure machines.

Aila, noticing Sloane's interest, ran over to it and eagerly explained, "That's one of my latest experiments! I'm trying to find a way to accomplish something similar to what the Church has done. I was able to get one of their primers, and it helped... initially, but they are missing so much! It's frustrating, to say the least. They also use a different sort of magic than my own, but I believe I can do something... more precise. Especially with my knowledge of *essentia*."

"Interesting. I've gone through the Ceremony of Paths in Marketbol. Does it work?"

The elf smiled.

"Yes! Well... sort of. It's not dangerous if that's what you're thinking."

Sloane wasn't... at least until the woman said something.

"Let me show you!"

She yanked a chair and literally *shoved* it in front of the table before motioning hurriedly for Sloane to sit down.

*This woman t is about to use me in her experiment... great.*

She took the seat and got a better look at the device while Aila explained, "Inside the cuff is an opal and an emerald, I don't know if you are aware—"

"The opal connects to someone's mind, but a dwarven friend of mine from Westaren and I weren't able to figure out what the emerald connected to. We know it was something internal."

That brought a beaming smile to Aila's face. "Yes! Perfect, it's so refreshing to speak with someone who understands. I'm not surprised you didn't know about the emerald, because that... interacts with *essentia*."

Sloane's interest was officially piqued. "What information are you able to gather from *essentia*?"

“Everything about *how* we’ve been changed. Essentia is what does it. The opal connects to your mind so that we can attempt to ascertain the details of your... ah, what does the church call it?”

“Your excerpt. Or path. Basically a snapshot of your system details.”

The woman hesitated for a second and then jerked into motion and grabbed a notebook and opened it before scribbling something down.

When she looked back up, she smiled. “Perfect! Yes, your excerpt.”

“This is still a prototype. I haven’t discovered an effective way to show what information it learns, but I know it’s able to gather it all.”

“So, I just put my arm in the cuff?”

“Yes!”

Sloane took a deep breath and then slipped her hand through the opening and rested her palm comfortably on the device. Aila placed a finger on an **[Activate]** rune that was etched onto the device and fed mana through it.

The moment Aila activated the device, Sloane felt a gentle pulse of energy wrap around her wrist. It wasn’t painful, but it was certainly... different. It was as if a soft current of electricity was coursing through her veins, seeking out information

She could feel the opal connecting with her mind, a gentle probing sensation that was neither invasive nor uncomfortable. The emerald, on the other hand, felt deeper, more intrinsic, as if it was reaching into the very core of her being.

The crystal orb next to the cuff began to glow with a soft, pulsating light. The three small blue cores beside it started to swirl with mana, creating a faint hum in the air. Sloane watched as the light in the orb intensified, swirling with the colors of mana she was attuned to, which was promising.

Aila’s eyes were fixed on the orb, her face a mask of concentration. She seemed to be lost in thought, her fingers twitching as if she were trying to grasp something just out of reach.

Then, the orb quickly flashed three times and glowed white, it was fairly bright, but not excessively. Then it flashed one short, one long, and another short before lighting up, but this time it was clearly less bright. Sloane wasn’t sure what to make of it, because then it pulsed with three long flashes and this time the brightness was the lowest.

After what felt like an eternity, the light in the orb dimmed, and the cores stopped swirling. Aila blinked, looking slightly dazed, and turned to Sloane. “It worked,” she whispered, her voice filled with awe.

Sloane slowly withdrew her hand from the cuff, flexing her fingers.

“How do you feel?” Aila asked, her voice tinged with both excitement and concern.

Sloane took a moment to assess herself. “I feel... fine. A bit tingly, but otherwise okay.”

Aila let out a sigh of relief. “Good. That’s what I hoped for. Now, the real challenge is deciphering the data.”

Sloane raised an eyebrow. “You mean you don’t know how to read the information it’s gathered?”

Aila grimaced. “Not yet. But with your help, and the resources you can provide, I believe we can crack it. This could be the key to understanding *essentia* on a level we’ve never imagined.”

“What did the flashing mean?”

“Oh, that? It was showing the relative strength of each attribute.”

Sloane looked up at the woman. “What?”

“You know, it’s right here in the primer...” She grabbed a small notebook with symbols from the Church on the front and opened it up before flipping through it. “Yes, attributes. The Three C’s. Capability, Control, and Constitution.”

“I know what the attributes are, Aila. I meant, what do you mean by relative strength?”

Her mouth made a little ‘o’ shape. “Sorry~!” she sang more than said. “So, *essentia* floods through us whenever we perform an action that the *manamind*—”

“I’m sorry, what? *Manamind*?”

“*Mana* has a mind of its own...”

Sloane winced. “I don’t think *mana* is sapient. I’ve referred to it as its intent. Basically, it acts like a string of instructions that are focused on making us stronger for some reason.”

The woman hummed for a second and then shrugged. “That works. Anyways~!”

She was much happier now and seemed to want to press ahead. Sloane could just picture the woman with a white lab coat, rubber gloves, and some goggles on her head. Maybe some crazy frizzy hair too.

The mad scientist continued, “We discussed a bit of this, but to expand: we gain *essentia* when we perform actions that are associated with our...” She looked at her primer again then nodded. “Path. I called it something different... but I digress. Remember, whenever you feel that rush, and gain a step, that is *essentia* binding itself to you and flooding your body with that sweet strengthening goodness. Both magical and physical~!”

Sloane was starting to think this woman *was* crazy, but she had to admit, it was much more interesting. *And* she was learning so much.

*So, definitely a system. I mean, I already knew that... but still. Nice to have even more data points.*

The thought was a bit sobering. *Does this mean we're living in a simulation?*

She shook her head. *Nah.*

Aila's informative discussion trucked on, "So, your attributes—the three C's—are increased at that point. Your attributes are a direct reflection of how much *essentia* your body contains. Now, I do not know *why* *essentia* interacts with us all differently. But just like the Church says, we have primary, secondary, and tertiary attributes. The glowing you saw of three different brightnesses? That is telling us how *much* of that attribute your body has. The different sequences beforehand were telling me *which* attribute it was.

Sloane nodded. "So the first one was Control."

"Yes! Just like me. Control is *very* important for people like us."

"How so?"

"I'll show you more later, but control allows us to utilize mana easier and with more focus."

Sloane nodded again. That made sense. "So, what was the second one?"

"Capability! That one *isn't* like me. My second is constitution. Which means your constitution is lowest. However, the strength of each one is significantly stronger than mine. Even your constitution was higher than mine and it's your lowest."

"Right, you talked about that briefly yesterday. When you told me about how the core quality is what dictates how pure the *essentia* is. For example, mine is exceptional. So, does that mean yours is lower?"

The woman frowned. "My core only has one color, and it's blue. According to the primer, it likely means its vulgar quality, but I think I have two domains, if the primer is correct."

She sighed. Sloane knew she should probably tell the woman. If they were going to work together, she'd likely find out anyways. "It should be, I was the one that taught them about domains. Which means you are *actually* more likely to have a remarkable quality core."

The woman's eyes shot open.

Sloane continued, "It also makes sense if higher quality means more attributes. At least one of your domains is artifice, correct?"

Aila shrugged. "Based on what I've read, I believe so. I also suspect I have evocation. But I have no way of confirming yet."

*Wait.* Sloane started laughing, she couldn't help it. She knew *exactly* what this led to, and she pulled up her watch, showing it to Aila. "This is my watch. I helped create it back on my world. Well, when I was brought here, mana *changed* it. I still do not know why, and I still haven't delved into it all. It started vibrating every time I gain a step, but it doesn't really tell me anything. I can also store spells inside of it, except some spells."

The woman's expression perked up. "Interesting!"

"Well, one time I was able to have it show me what my stats were and it showed me a little triangle. Which I didn't know what it meant at the time, but it was probably showing me the same thing your test just did."

Aila's eyes widened. "Can you show me? You said *mana* changed this? What does that mean?"

"It means that every little thing inside of it is not the same as what it was when I was still on Earth. It is a completely new device."

Sloane fed some mana into her watch and sent a mental command to show her stats. Just like before, the screen swirled and a little triangle appeared. Aila's eyes were transfixed.

"I need to display the information just like this. That would be much more efficient."

And it would help them create more advanced ways to interact with the system and grab someone's details. Which would probably help Sloane's House and businesses go around the Church's monopoly on the practice.

"I can show you how to make a screen to display information. I already do it for my Runecard system. I'd like you to show me more of what you can do to interact with *essentia*. I think we could do exactly what you're trying to accomplish, and I think it would be very beneficial."

The woman's beaming smile was infectious and Sloane found her own lips curling up.

"I'd be happy to! Does that mean we're going to work together?"

Sloane considered it and stood up. She looked around for a moment, thinking. So far she'd been lucky, and she had this same mental quandary with Adaega before hiring her as the Marketbol director.

She was going to leave, but she would have a lot more time with Aila to get things set up. From what she could see, the high elf needed it. Her pink eyes followed Sloane expectantly.

The woman was brilliant, there was no doubt about that. An elf, a high medieval elf at that, had been a part of a team that discovered magic's version of blood cells. This was fascinating, and now the woman had *proved* that you could quantify your attributes.

Sloane had suspected it yesterday when the woman had first discussed it, but now she was sure.

“Alright, I’m sold. I think we can work well together. Before we get into what to expect, is there anything else you’d like to show me?”

“Yes!” Aila cried out, pumping her fist. Sloane couldn’t help but smile. “There is one more thing. This, right here,” she said while pointing at the table.

Sloane looked at another cuff-like item that lay on a table and squinted at the device, intrigued but cautious. “And what’s the purpose of this?”

Aila’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “If it works as I intend, it could allow the wearer to focus mana for various magical applications instead of just using their intent casting ability that’s enhanced by the mana’s... intent. It works with something I like to call ‘intuitive casting’, where you gain the ability to manipulate specific aspects of magic and then you can do so much more than cast spells that the intent imprints in your mind. However, I think that while this type of casting is the most versatile, it’s the most inefficient. In the end, I believe there are three distinctive methods of using magic. The one I am currently most intrigued with is something much different than the imprinted spells and likely more complex, but it allows for even stronger spells if set up properly.”

“Really?” She drew mana into herself as she lifted a hand in front of herself and formed a **[Mana Bolt]** above her palm. “You think there’s more to this than just drawing mana and forcing it to form one of the spells that mana’s intent created in my mind?”

The woman’s eyes lingered on the crackling orb of arcane energy that created a soft purple glow around the room.

“Yes. I think that form of casting is the most likely to be used since it relies on the assistance of mana, basically what I call ‘intent casting’. People like you are those who do it by feeling or connecting with the underlying intent of mana. It’s a different way of magic and one that can be expanded upon.” She stepped closer to Sloane. “May I examine your magic?”

“Uh... Sure?” Sloane lifted her hand and watched as Aila’s irises lit up in a bright glowing blue color. She stood there, entranced for almost two minutes that Sloane didn’t dare interrupt.

Without warning, the woman’s eyes returned to normal and she nodded. “I think I have it. That would be much more difficult if you hadn’t let me examine it closely.”

Sloane tilted her head, bemused.

As the woman stepped back, Sloane’s **[Mana Sense]** helped her to feel the mana in the area rise

Aila continued with only a bit of effort leaking into her voice, “Now, let me show... you...”

She didn’t need a more blatant invitation to use **[Mana Sight]**.



She watched as Aila lifted both hands and wove them quickly through the air, her fingers tracing intricate patterns. Sloane could see the flow of mana, the way it twisted and turned, responding to Aila's movements

The air around Aila's hands began to shimmer with a faint glow, and as she continued to weave her hands, the glow intensified. Sloane's eyes widened as she saw a rune forming in mid-air, suspended between Aila's outstretched hands. It was the rune for **[Mana Bolt]**, and one that Sloane was intimately familiar with after etching it into so many spell cartridges for the casters she made for her and Ismeld.

But this was different.

Not only was the rune made completely of mana, it was hovering in the damn air. As it finished its formation, the mana making up the rune condensed together and coalesced into a large, dense **[Mana Bolt]** that appeared between Aila's hands. It crackled with energy and looked far more potent than any Sloane had formed without excruciating effort and drawing of mana.

And the woman had done it after staring at her spell for two minutes.

*Holy fuck.*

Aila held the **[Mana Bolt]** for a moment, her eyes focused on the spell, then released it. The bolt shot forward, striking a target on the far wall of the workshop with a resounding crack. The impact left a scorched mark on the wall and tossed some nearby items away in the resulting force.

Sloane stared at the aftermath, her mind racing. *That was incredible*, she thought.

Aila turned to Sloane, a triumphant smile on her face. "That's what I've been working on," she said, her voice filled with excitement. "I call it rune casting. It's a *different* way of casting. It doesn't mean it's better, just one that allows for greater control and precision. And it's just the beginning."

Sloane nodded, her mind still processing what she had just witnessed. "That was amazing, Aila. Truly. But how does it work? How are you able to form the rune like that?"

Aila's eyes sparkled with excitement. "It's all about understanding the runic structure of magic," she explained. "Once you understand the runes and how they interact, you can manipulate them to create more powerful and precise spells."

"I have **[Runic Knowledge]** and I've never even considered applying it to my spells. It's been most helpful with learning how to inscribe runes into materials that allow me to create things like Vesper, here," she said with a gesture toward the metal cat, who let out a deep, "*Mrreeowwrr!*"

Aila's gaze darted to the cat and held an almost whimsical smile. "She's fascinating. But it makes sense! Runic enchantments... Ah, that's where *I* fell behind." She started laughing. "It seems we are two sides of a runic coin!"

Sloane chuckled.

She went back to the incredible display Aila had shown. “Your magic though. This is an entirely new branch and way to look at mana and magic that I didn’t even know existed,” she said, her voice filled with excitement. “The potential applications are vast. We could create new, stronger spells, enhance existing ones, and even develop new magical technologies.”

Aila’s eyes shone with excitement. “Exactly! That’s what I’ve been working towards. And with your support, I believe we can achieve something truly remarkable.”

Sloane’s eyes darted back over everything Aila was doing. “I have a question though.”

“Of course, I’ll answer in any way I can.”

“What have you done to make money? To ensure you have enough funding?”

The woman looked at her with confusion. “What do you mean? We’re... sorry, I have been focused on research, to create—”

Now everything made sense.

“Let me guess” Sloane interrupted, her voice gentle but firm. “You’ve been so absorbed in your research that you’ve neglected the practical side of things. You haven’t been thinking about how to sustain yourself financially, have you?”

Aila’s eyes dropped to the floor, and she nodded slowly. “You’re right,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. “I’ve been so focused on my work that I haven’t given much thought to anything else. I’ve been living off the dwindling savings and the money I made from Aredd’s estate.”

Sloane sighed, her mind racing. *She’s brilliant, but she’s also naive. She needs guidance, someone to help her navigate the practical side of things.*

“How were you funded originally?”

“Aredd managed to get some investments from a few local nobles. That stopped long before Aredd even died. He actually left to go try and secure funding from the Crown since this... field has become such a focus. The king is even building what he calls an ‘Arcanum’.”

“I’ve heard. Quite a few times actually. That’s something we need to keep in mind. Were any of the local nobles from House Estos?”

Aila squinted as if in thought then shook her head. “No. If I remember correctly, they weren’t interested at all. Aredd spoke to one of the ladies of the House and couldn’t gain an audience with Viscount Estos at all.”

“Okay, good. We can work with that. Now, I understand your passion for your work, Aila,” Sloane said compassionately. “But you need to think about your future. You can’t continue like this.”

You need a sustainable source of income. If we're going to work together, that needs to be a priority. Research for research's sake is not something easily maintained."

Aila looked up at Sloane, her eyes filled with a mix of hope and desperation. "I know, but I don't know what to do. I've been so focused on my research that I haven't thought about anything else."

Sloane nodded, her mind made up. "I'll help you, Aila. I'll provide you with the funding you need to continue your research. But in return, I want you to work with me. I am going to be starting my second Reinhart Center here in Nornport, and I suspect that House Estos will be partnering with me. Looking at what you have done here, and the direction I am taking my own projects, I think the focus of this center will be on personal devices and maybe golems. I want to help you develop your ideas into practical applications that can benefit everyone. I want to take that..." She pointed at the big *essentia* analyzer device. "...and put it on everyone's wrist. Let them be able to pull up their real-time information about their path, attributes, and spells whenever they want."

Aila's eyes widened, and she looked at Sloane with a mixture of disbelief and gratitude. "You would do that with me?"

Sloane nodded. "Yes, I would. Your work has the potential to revolutionize the world of magic. I want to be a part of that. But you need to be practical. You need to think about your future and how to sustain yourself."

Aila nodded, tears glistening in her eyes. "Thank you, Sloane. Thank you so much."

Sloane smiled, her heart warmed by Aila's gratitude. "You're welcome, Aila. Now, let's get to work. We have a lot to do. Then, I want you to meet me tomorrow so we can go visit Lord Estos together."

As they sat down to discuss their plans, Sloane couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement. She was about to embark on a journey that could change the course of magical history, and she couldn't wait to see where it would lead.



Sloane, Mariel, and Vesper returned to their suite that evening, each of them visibly exhausted from the day's events. Mariel let out a groan as she slumped into a chair. "I'm so tired!"

The Blade and the former Fist were already in the suite. Stefan, who appeared to be lounging comfortably, glanced up at Mariel from a book, his eyes dancing with amusement. "You two were gone for quite a while. Did Sloane put you to work?"

Nemura smirked while she kept sharpening her blade.

Mariel, her shoulders slumping, nodded. "It was a lot."

Sloane shook her head in amusement. "She did very well taking notes of my meeting with Aila."

Mariel managed a weary smile in response before handing the notebook filled with notes to Sloane. She then called for Vesper to follow her and jumped up to dart toward her room. Sloane watched as the massive golem eagerly followed the teenager into her room, the door closing behind them.

Tiberius was perched on a chair across from Nemura and chirped at her.

"Hey Tibbie," Sloane greeted the bird.

The bird gave her a reproachful look.

"Sorry. Tiberius," Sloane corrected herself with a roll of her eyes.

The bird chirped happily in response, seemingly appeased.

Nemura narrowed her golden eyes. "That woman you met with, Aila, she seemed..."

"Eccentric," Sloane finished for her. "But I think that's mainly because she's clearly very stressed, on the verge of depression, and overworked," she explained, her voice tinged with sympathy. "She's perfect for what we want. And the ideas I had fit neatly with where her research is. Everyone needs a mad scientist in their life."

Nemura frowned, her brow furrowing in confusion. "A what?"

"Nevermind," Sloane waved off the question. "The important part is, I think we have a director for the center. The only downside is that we need to find someone good at marketing and making money. That is *not* Aila."

"What about Estos?" the Blade asked.

Sloane shook her head. "I don't want him doing day-to-day work at the center. I don't think him having that level of control is healthy for us. I will partner with him, and I think we can use that partnership to potentially source or distribute whatever the center develops, but I want full control over the center itself."

Stefan nodded in agreement, his eyes thoughtful. "That's probably wise," he said, his voice measured. "You don't want to give away too much control too soon. Especially not to someone who has their own agenda..."

"So, Stefan, any updates?" Sloane asked, her eyes focused on the *sauve raithe*.

He shook his head. “Not yet. However, I did manage to find a few potential esquires. There's one man in particular who seems to fit the bill. I can arrange a meeting for first thing tomorrow morning, if you'd like. He could then accompany us to see Lord Estos.”

Sloane nodded in agreement. “That sounds like a good plan. Thanks, Stefan. That will be very helpful. Any word from or about your sister or the others, yet?”

“No, but I wouldn't expect any news yet,” Stefan replied. “We got delayed in Swanbrook, and they were expecting us to stop in Calling. With winter approaching and the weather getting colder, it's unlikely we'll receive any messages until spring. By then, we should have the center up and running, and we can send a detailed report of our progress. We can also leave instructions on how to find us.”

Sloane considered this for a moment. “That sounds like a solid plan. I agree. Any updates on the war?”

Nemura chimed in, “Yes, it's not going well for either side. The Empire has been held back on all fronts, and the war is officially entering a stalemate since the Sovereign Cities have finally gotten their act together. In fact, there's news,” she paused, reaching into a bag and pulling out some papers, handing them to Sloane.

Sloane's eyes widened in recognition. Newspapers.

The age of information had begun.

“Newspapers, huh? That's a surprisingly modern concept. Has Rosale always had these?” Sloane asked, her curiosity piqued.

Nemura and Stefan both shook their heads.

Nemura explained, “No, they're a recent innovation, an idea from the king's terran advisor. He was so taken with the concept that he ordered each city to start producing them. They're a bit pricey, one small silver each, but the information they contain is invaluable.”

Sloane nodded in understanding. “Oh, trust me, I know how informative they can be...”

*And how manipulative of society they can get at their worst.*

Nemura shrugged. “Anyway, the Sovereign Cities are hosting a summit. There's talk that they're considering forming a nation.”

Sloane's eyes widened in surprise. “That's a major development. Won't that constitute a significant shift in the region's political landscape?”

“Definitely,” Nemura agreed. “The Empire of Vlaredia has conquered almost half of the territory traditionally considered part of the Sovereign Cities, but most of that land was sparsely populated. Word has just arrived that Swanbrook has fallen. This makes the capture of Swanbrook and the Geraldine Triangle their most significant gain in terms of economic potential and population.

Now, the Empire needs to consolidate its gains and establish a reliable logistics network to maintain control. The conquest of Earthenwilde was a major victory, allowing them to defend against the entire central plains from a single location.”

“Shit... we got out just in time, didn't we?”

Nemura nodded. “Yes. It would have been a bad position to be in. I don't believe it will be all easy for my former countrymen. They are staunch believers in the Family and will not want to antagonize the Church that they follow. The cult will be a source of issues for any occupation force. We saw how much this caused problems for the city before we left. That may have been part of the reason for the fall.”

She didn't know war, but that didn't sound like a good situation to be in. She only sided more with the Sovereign Cities because of her interests in Marketbol and the bullshit that Ressa pulled.

*Actually...*

“Any news from Westaren?” Sloane asked.

“Surprisingly, yes. The Royal Army finally managed to clear out Thirdghyll of monsters. There's talk that the city may not be rebuilt for some time, if at all, due to the growth of Vilstaf,” Nemura reported.

Sloane hummed in thought. “That's good news for Reanny and Murinn. So, nothing about Marketbol?”

“Nothing, I'm afraid,” Nemura replied, her voice apologetic.

“It's okay. We'll send a letter soon. Anything else?” Sloane asked, her gaze shifting between Nemura and Stefan.

The two exchanged a glance before Stefan spoke up. “Expect an awkward conversation with Lord Estes tomorrow, in addition to discussing the center.”

“Why?”

“House Estes has officially announced that the next Head of House will be decided by the end of Spring,” Stefan explained.

“Why would I care about that? The center is already going to give Ilian a significant boost in my opinion,” Sloane said dismissively.

“Yes, but they will expect him to be engaged by then,” Stefan said. He winced as if expecting her to get mad. After all, they'd all discussed it. Recently even.

He couldn't be further from the truth.

Sloane laughed.

“What? Okay, so what? It sure as hell isn’t going to be me. If he tries to push, I’ll shut that shit down real quick.”

“Can I be there for that?” Nemura asked.

“Abso-fucking-lutely. I have zero interest in any arranged marriage bullshit. We’ll do the center our damn selves before I do anything like that.”

Stefan’s wince deepened. “Maybe we should see what he has to say before you start a personal inquisition.”

“At least you understand me, Stefan.”

“I’m just worried about how Vesper will react to your anger.”

Nemura laughed. “Oh shit. I really have to see this. Stefan, let’s go grab a drink. We need to discuss a bet.”

The man sighed.

“Fine.”

Sloane raised a brow. “What bet?”

“On the outcome of whatever conversation is coming, of course.”

“I’m not sure if I’m comfortable with you two betting on my personal life.”

“You’re welcome to come train with me tomorrow afterward instead.”

Sloane tilted her head and Nemura’s eyes widened when she realized Sloane was actually considering it.

“You know what? Sure. Let’s do it. Find somewhere private while I meet with the esquire. I want to actually see what Mariel can do with her magic.”

Stefan started choking on his own spit. “Doesn’t she raise the dead?”

“I guess we’ll just have to find some bones.”

The look on her two retainers was absolutely priceless.