
Not So Safe House

“Sloane, watch out!”

Heeding Stefan’s yell, Sloane dove to the side, and in the act, narrowly evaded two crossbow bolts that flew through where she had stood. She shot to her feet, casting two **[Mana Bolts]** in the direction of her attackers. A cry of pain confirmed that at least one of them had been struck, just as she instinctively raised her arm to defend against another attacker’s mace swing. The impact reverberated through her, causing her bones to rattle against her watch’s **[Spell Buckler]** runic spell, she grit her teeth, but her defense held.

In response, Sloane swung her sword, its glowing runes enhancing the blade’s weight and power, clashing against the man’s mace.

The man shoved her back, and pulled his mace back for another swing, only for another body to fly through the air and collided with him, sending them both crashing down in a heap.

Two **[Mana Bolts]** ensured they would not get up.

Sloane glanced over to see Nemura recover and engage another man, swiftly bringing her large weapon to bear. A single swing of her sword was all it required to utterly collapse the man’s guard and cleave into him.

Meanwhile, Stefan and Yemina fought alongside each other, skillfully dispatching a group of cultists. Sloane seized the opportunity to cast a **[Mana Bolt]** that caught an unsuspecting enemy caster off guard, neutralizing the threat.

Moving on, Sloane reached down and yanked a grenade from her belt and waited for a brief moment before hurling it through the now doorless opening leading to the front of the safe house. Panic-filled cries echoed from outside before an **[Arcane Explosion]** shook the building.

Her hand remained raised, ready to confront any emerging threats, but to her surprise, no one emerged. Refocusing her attention, she spotted a rock hurtling toward one of the Blades assigned to protect her.

The unfortunate woman fell lifelessly to the ground, but Sloane managed to raise her watch and use the **[Spell Buckler]** in time to protect herself from a similar fate as another rock smashed into its blue energy in a spray of arcane sparks. Maintaining her guard, she aimed her hand at the second caster and unleashed an **[Arcane Lance]**. A wall of stone burst up from the floor to block the spell and the beam bored into it before finally piercing and exiting on the other side.

Kneeling down, Sloane carefully observed for any sign of movement from the remaining caster. As expected, the man leaped out from the side, launching another rock in her direction, but it missed its mark entirely. Swiftly recovering, Sloane prepared to cast another spell, only to be interrupted by a sharp cry.

“Wryaattt!”

Tiberius flew down, descended from the rafters, talons first, directly into the man's face. The assailant shrieked in agony, attempting to fend off the bird's attack, but Tiberius' stainless steel talons had pierced deep, and the golem relentlessly pecked at the man's face.

Moments later, the bird took flight once again as the defeated man slumped to the ground, his gaze lifeless and eyeless. Almost simultaneously, the sole remaining enemy fell, hands clutched to his stomach, as he was dispatched by the other assigned Blade.

Silence descended upon the scene as everyone slowly took stock of the situation. Sloane's golem returned, landing gracefully on her shoulder, as she moved to check on the others.

Yemina, the paladin, knelt by the fallen woman, her armor gleaming in the sunlight as she reached out a hand to offer solace. After a moment of contemplation, she rose to her feet, her head shaking in a gesture of solemn resignation.

Nemura rested a hand on Sloane's shoulder. “I think it's time you finish that project of yours,” her head guard suggested, her voice low.

Sloane nodded. “I agree. At the next location.”

How did we get here?



Early Winter

The air was frigid, a gust carrying a biting chill that hinted at the arrival of early winter, but any thoughts of retreating to the safety of indoors were forgotten Sloane, Mariel, and Yemina. The three stood there, their gaze unwavering, their collective gaze locked on the scene that lay before them.

The Swanbrook Temple burned.

In the most audacious act since their attack within the Justicar's Hall, the cultists' destructive fervor had reduced the temple's once pristine facade to a fiery spectacle. Plumes of

smoke billowed upwards, merging with the wintry mist to cast an eerie, somber pall over the cityscape.

Sloane held Mariel close as the thirteen-year-old softly wept, her face hidden by both her hood and Sloane's embrace. Yemina stood on the opposite side of the raithe priestess-in-training in a cheap, new set of armor that made her appear as a knight-errant within Sloane's House. It was a necessary subterfuge as it was dangerous for the woman to stand out as a paladin. While the armor itself was nothing special, and helped her to blend in due to its mundanity, Sloane had enchanted the pieces with various runes such as **|Strengthen|** and **|Lighten|**.

The three stood there as the discordant clamor of the city's fire brigade resonated among the streets, piercing through the roar of the fire that consumed the temple. The silhouettes of the volunteers, backlit by the ferocious glow of the fire, moved hastily against the scene of destruction. Figures scurried back and forth, passing buckets of water in a frenzied assembly line extending from the city's closest water source.

"We should go," Sloane spoke softly, her gaze still fixed on the burning temple. Yemine nodded slowly, gently guiding Mariel from the painful sight. As they turned to leave, they saw Nemura approaching them, her face in a hard set under the hood the tall tely wore—a fact shared by the rest of them. Without a word, the four of them departed from the scene.

The attacks are getting bolder. Don't the cultists know they are just helping the Empire?

Tucked away in a quieter area of the city, their safe house was a modest, unassuming townhouse, its facade seamlessly blending into the surrounding architecture. As they opened the door, they were greeted by the sight of Stefan, the raithe deeply engrossed in a conversation with the two Blades assigned for their protection. The room fell into an abrupt silence as the occupants jerked their heads towards the disturbance, their hands instinctively gravitating towards the hilts of their weapons. Suspense hung in the air, only to dissipate as recognition swept through the room like a reassuring wave, eroding the tension in an instant.

The three exchanged a quick word, before the man and woman stepped away, leaving Stefan with Sloane and the others.

Her rogue-ish guard cleared his throat, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "I've asked around," he started, his voice filled with a frustration that mirrored Sloane's own. "We are well and truly stuck within the city. No one is attempting to flee, and I even hinted to a few that were on the line that we could protect them."

Nemura huffed and sat down heavily on one of the nearby chairs. "How would we protect them?"

"My **[Arcane Mortar]**," Sloane said. "The best defense is an unstoppable offense."

Stefan nodded. “Exactly. Unfortunately, no one is willing to test the Vlareidian Blockade.”

Yemina sighed as she too sat down, directing Mariel to take the chair next to hers. “And we cannot leave by land. The Southern Front is being pushed back toward the city,” she said, her voice filled with regret. “Meanwhile, Marketbol is still being harassed by the imperials, even if the city will not fall, they are being prevented from reinforcing here.”

Sloane groaned. “Fine, well, let’s make the most of it,” she said.



Late Winter

The first sign something was off was the knock at the door. No one was supposed to be coming to the Safe House, and only the Guildmaster for the Blades’ Guild knew exactly which one they resided in. Especially not this late into winter.

Nemura and Yemina grabbed their weapons, while Sloane quickly moved Mariel to hide under one of the beds.

The banging on the door sounded again, as Sloane returned to what she would call the living room. The two Blades had retrieved some small crossbows and were set up to fire on the doorway in case of any trouble. Sloane moved off to the side, her hand slipping to one of her **[Flashbang]** grenades. The act gave her a sense of safety that she would have thought absolutely insane back on Earth.

Nemura turned and nodded to Stefan, who called out loudly, “One moment! I’m coming!”

His hand slipped around the handle and he glanced up at Nemura who brought up her shield.

With a nod, he unlocked the door and swiftly pulled it open, swiftly stepping aside to stay concealed. But no sooner did the door swing open than a hail of crossbow bolts whizzed through the entryway, finding their mark in the wall opposite, embedding themselves with a resounding thud.

Reacting swiftly, Sloane jammed the activation button on the grenade and tossed it underhand, propelling it right out the door. The metallic clink of the grenade caught the attention of those outside, but to her satisfaction, their reactions remained subdued.

Three heartbeats later, the grenade erupted in a thunderous crack, accompanied by a blinding flash of light. The air filled with cries of surprise and pain as the assailants outside reeled from the explosion. Nemura and Yemina, both poised for action, surged forward, their shields

leading the way as they forcefully engaged their attackers. In the midst of the chaos, Sloane hung back, as planned, channeling mana into herself, ready to unleash her spells at a moment's notice.

Following the predetermined plan, Stefan bided his time for five seconds before dashing out alongside one of the Blades, providing additional support in the fierce melee that Sloane could hear but not see.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the sounds of clashing weapons and cries of combat subsided. The silence that followed was broken only by the heavy panting of those who remained standing. Nemura emerged through the doorway, her breathing steady despite the exertion, and her face adorned with streaks of dirt and sweat. She locked eyes with Sloane and sighed, acknowledging the inevitable reality.

"It's done," the former Empire's Fist declared, her tone resolute. "We took down seven cultists. Unfortunately, it's clear we'll need to relocate."

The Blades returned and began to discuss the next move. Everyone understood that staying in the compromised safe house was no longer an option. The Blades reiterated that their priority was to ensure the safety of everyone under their care, and that they would relocate that night.

Sloane glanced over at Mariel, who timidly emerged from her hiding place. The thirteen-year-old girl looked shaken, her eyes wide with fear. Sloane approached her gently, offering a comforting smile.

"It's alright, Mariel," she reassured the young priestess-in-training. "We're all safe. We just need to find a new place to stay, away from potential threats."

The young raithe nodded, seemingly finding solace in Sloane's words.

Sloane glanced around at the scene before turning her focus on Nemura and the Blades. "I need to get to work, what's the likelihood I can get access to our wagon?"

The Blades shared a glance, the woman pursing her lips a moment before nodding to herself. "Let us get everyone settled and ensure these... cultists are not aware of our new location. Then we can see about random trips to the Banking Guild, although they may be observing it. We can speak to Guildmaster Cross to see if we can get some supplies delivered discreetly to the next safe house. No promises, however."

Sloane sighed, as she walked over and retrieved her grenade, ready to place it on her personal Runic Renewal Device that she had built. "I would appreciate it, I will run out of grenades quickly if this keeps happening, plus I think it's about time I got back to work."

Nemura tilted her head. "You've been enchanting our equipment still."

“That’s true,” Sloane conceded. “But I haven’t *made* anything. I want to make myself a Caster like the one I made for Ismeld. And something else, I think.”



Spring

While Mariel and some of the others slept, Sloane found herself engrossed in her work, her attention riveted to the task before her. The Blades had helped set up a small workbench in a tiny room of the third safe house since that first attack a season ago, a room that was now bathed in the soft, warm glow of a solitary oil lamp, its light casting dancing shadows that played upon the walls.

The scent of metal and magic hung heavy in the air, a peculiarity she had thought strange the first time she’d experienced it, but perhaps it was a testament to the unique fusion of craftsmanship and sorcery that was Sloane’s newfound specialty.

Before her lay the beginnings of her second caster, a device of sleek steel that was gradually taking form under her deft hands. The cool, smooth steel was a canvas for her artistry, the stark simplicity of the material contrasting sharply with the intricate design that was slowly emerging from her enchanting pen. This version—Caster Mk II as she called it—was a departure from the functional design of the one she had crafted for Ismeld; it was a piece of art, a testament to her evolving mastery of her craft. The runes she etched into the steel were not merely functional but also formed an aesthetically pleasing pattern that flowed seamlessly across the spell gun’s surface. Each rune was precisely engraved, their sharp edges glowing with a faint, latent power.

With a steady, practiced rhythm, Sloane guided her enchanting pen across the steel, each stroke a conduit for her magic. The pen, an instrument of her will, channeled her magic into the caster, imbuing it with power. As she worked, she could feel the caster responding to her touch, the runes resonating with her magic, their power amplifying with each stroke.

The weapon itself was a marvel of magical engineering. Its sleek, steel body was compact yet sturdy, designed for both durability and ease of use. The breechloading mechanism was ingeniously integrated into the design, allowing for quick and efficient reloading of spell cartridges. The mana crystal chamber, located above the pistol grip, housed a carefully selected crystal, its vibrant energy pulsating in rhythm with the mana it collected.

Internally, the grip was adorned with a series of gems—rubies, diamonds, amethyst, sapphires, and both a black and pink diamond, each serving a specific function in the runic weapon’s operation. These gems were hidden from view, their magic working silently within the

confines of the steel body. However, two opals were set into the exterior of the pistol grip, while a third opal was set into the trigger, their iridescent glow a subtle hint at the power contained within. The three combined in a unique feature that facilitated a connection with Sloane and her core, tying the caster to her mana signature, a safeguard that ensured that only she could wield it.

In a way, the caster had become more than just a weapon. It was as if it was an extension of Sloane herself, a powerful demonstration of her growing understanding of mana and how to combine the arcane with technology as she understood it.

As the days turned into a long week, Sloane continued to pour her energy and focus into the project. Each day, she meticulously etched and empowered more runes, the intricate design becoming more complex and complete. The caster was gradually transforming from a piece of steel into a powerful magical tool, a testament to Sloane's skill and dedication. The work was demanding, requiring her full attention and precision, but she found a sense of peace and satisfaction in it. Each stroke of her enchanting pen, each rune she etched, brought her closer to her goal.

Finally, after days of intense work, the caster was complete. Sloane held the finished product in her hands, a sense of accomplishment washing over her. The steel body of the caster was cool to the touch, the intricate design of the runes glowing faintly under the soft light of the oil lamp. She admired her work for a moment, a smile tugging at the corners of her lips. Then, she reached for the new holster she had prepared, attaching it to her right thigh. She slid the caster into the holster, content at the perfect fit, before placing the enchanted weapon back onto the table.

On her belt, she had added pouches for her spell cartridges, along with several slots for quick access, reminiscent of the old western belts she had seen in movies back on Earth.

With a sigh, she leaned back, her gaze shifting as the sound of footsteps reverberated through the room. Raising her eyes, she caught sight of Nemura's entrance, her tall figure cast in a captivating silhouette against the muted glow of the hallway. The former Empire's Fist moved with a grace that belied her size, her eyes immediately drawn to the completed caster resting in its holster.

"Is that the new caster?" Nemura asked, her voice filled with curiosity as she approached the workbench. Her gaze was fixed on the sleek steel device, her eyes reflecting the faint glow of the etched runes.

Sloane nodded, a sense of pride swelling within her. "Yup, this is it. Great timing, I just finished."

Nemura's eyes widened slightly, a hint of admiration in her gaze. "Your craftsmanship has grown more elegant," she said, her voice soft. "And I have no doubt it's as deadly as it is beautiful if your grenades are anything to go by."

Sloane couldn't help but smile at the compliment. "Thank you, Nemura. I've learned a lot since I made the first one for Ismeld. This one is more... refined, I guess. And yes, it's quite deadly."

Nemura nodded, her gaze thoughtful. "I've seen what you can do with your magic, Sloane. If this caster can harness even a fraction of that power... well, our enemies should be very afraid."

Sloane chuckled, her hand instinctively resting on the grip of the caster. "Let's hope they are, Nemura. Let's hope they are."

With the completion of the caster, Sloane felt a sense of satisfaction, a moment that passed quickly as she realized it was just one more item on a list that had to be completed. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, gathering herself.

I have so much to do...

She opened her eyes, her gaze shifting to the corner of the room that played host to the supplies she had gathered for her next project.

It was everything she'd need—metal of various types and quantities, a small chest that held an assortment of gems, and another, larger, chest that held a set of carefully selected cores all lay there, ready to be transformed into her next golem.

Then next to the supplies on a small table was one of the key items, a small tin filled with the remainder of her Tè Luminoso. It was something that she definitely wasn't sold on using again, but she would have Nemura sit with her, just to be safe. The hyperfocused state it gave her with Tiberius would be something she needed.



Present

As the city began to wind down in the early evening, Sloane and Stefan found themselves navigating the less crowded streets. Sloane, her hood drawn up to conceal her features, moved with a purposeful stride, her eyes alert to the shifting shadows of the approaching dusk. Stefan, a steady presence at her side, mirrored her vigilance, his own gaze scanning their surroundings.

The two made their way through the city, Sloane following the raihte on a path that took them through dimly lit alleyways and along the quieter thoroughfares. Despite the calming

ambiance around them, Sloane and Stefan moved with a sense of urgency, their steps measured and deliberate. They were on a mission, and the approaching nightfall only added to their resolve.

Their destination was a rendezvous with a man that Stefan had discovered. As the time for their meeting drew closer, Sloane pulled her hood a little lower, her grip tightening on the hilt of her caster. The city was settling down for the evening meal, but for Sloane and Stefan, their evening was just beginning.

As they entered a narrow alley within a sparsely populated part of the city, an elderly telv woman was busily sweeping her stoop, her movements slow but deliberate. Her gaze, sharp despite her advanced years, fell upon Sloane. There was a moment where the woman's eyes darted over the terran's well-to-do clothing and a hint of recognition fell over her before a shared understanding quickly passed between them. With a slight nod, the woman acknowledged Sloane, her expression all but unreadable. Sloane returned the gesture, a silent exchange that spoke volumes in the quiet alleyway. The woman then returned to her task, her broom sweeping away the day's dust and debris, as Sloane and Stefan made their way to the welcoming warmth of the tavern a few doors down.

The establishment, with its weathered facade and dimly lit windows, exuded a sense of rustic charm that was quite enticing to Sloane. After all they'd been through the past few seasons, she longed for a place like this, hidden away as the troubles of the world faded over a drink. The faint strains of a lute drifted from within, mingling with the murmur of hushed conversations and the occasional clink of glassware as she followed her guard into the tavern.

As they made their way inside the tavern, she was indeed excited to see that the atmosphere was warm and inviting, a stark contrast to the cold chill outside. The soft glow of lanterns and the low flame of the hearth cast a cozy light over the wooden tables and chairs, illuminating the handful of patrons who were engrossed in their meals and conversations. Several faces looked up and stared at the two newcomers as they stood in the entryway. Among them, Sloane's gaze was drawn to a solitary figure seated at a table near the back. The man was unmistakably human, his features distinct in the sea of telv.

Stefan leaned in, his voice low as he nudged Sloane. "That's him," he said, subtly indicating the man at the back. The man, who appeared to be of Japanese descent, scanned the room with alert eyes, pausing briefly as his focus met Sloane's. She pulled down her hood, running a hand through her hair to uncover her ears and the man's eyes widened in recognition. As Stefan led the way toward the table, Sloane felt a mix of anticipation and curiosity.

The man looked up, his gaze meeting theirs with a calm, measured intensity before simply gesturing to the empty seats across from him, a silent invitation that they accepted. As they settled

into their seats, the man introduced himself. “I’m Haruto,” he said, his voice carrying almost no hint of an accent. His demeanor was composed, his words measured, reflecting a sense of quiet confidence.

Stefan introduced himself as the person who had passed along the request for a meeting.

“I’m Sloane,” she offered. “It is a pleasure to meet you Haruto.”

The man nodded, looking up as a waiter approached their table. He turned to Stefan and Sloane, ready to take their orders. Stefan requested a light meal, something that wouldn’t distract from the conversation. Sloane, on the other hand, asked for something warm, a comforting drink to ward off the evening chill. As the waiter nodded and left to fulfill their orders, Sloane turned her attention back to Haruto, ready to delve into the purpose of their meeting.

As soon as their food and drink arrived, Sloane leaned forward, curiosity overwhelming her. “So, when and where are *you* from?” she asked.

Haruto raised a brow, but took a moment to take another sip of his drink. “I am from the Star Kingdom of Crest,” he said with a hint of mirth in his voice. “I suspect you have zero idea what that means.”

Haruto’s revelation left Sloane momentarily speechless, her mind grappling with the unexpected twist. She sat there, her mind whirling, her gaze locked onto Haruto as she processed his words. She had anticipated him to be from Earth, like her, but maybe from a different era or alternate Earth similar to Adaega or even Baron Twit from Thirdghyll. However, a *star kingdom* was something completely unexpected, and frankly... fucking amazing.

Stefan, noticing her stunned silence, turned his attention to Haruto, his brows furrowing in a mix of confusion and curiosity.

“The Star Kingdom of Crest?” Stefan echoed, his tone laced with confusion. “What’s the significance of that, I’m not sure I understand.”

Haruto shrugged, a small, knowing smile playing on his lips. “Well, it’s quite simple,” he began, his voice steady. “Most humans I’ve encountered are from our homeworld, Earth, or some other variation of it. I am from another planet like this one, far from our homeworld. Fifteen hundred and thirty-six light years, give or take, to be more precise. I would try to convert your calendar into mine, but frankly, it would be quite difficult. The scattered stars of humanity, you see, no longer have a standardized system beyond their respective sectors.”

Sloane, regaining her composure, leaned forward, her curiosity reignited. “Are there any other sapient life forms?” she asked, her mind racing with all of the possibilities. “What about technology, you are *far* from Earth. Is that a distance that’s common to be traversed? Have you

tried to introduce anything from your tech level here? I heard about the terran that destroyed a dwarven city, but I haven't heard of anyone else doing anything. Are we really that rare? I've been trying—"

Haruto raised his hands, chuckling. "Woah, slow down there," he said, a smile growing on his face. "Let me answer some of your questions. First, no sapient life. Just animals of varying degrees of intelligence," he replied, his tone matter-of-fact. "Next, I and no one I know has ever been *anywhere* near Sol and the Solar Federation. Most people do not leave their sectors. The general rule is that every ten light years a system is from Earth, their level of tech is about a year and a half behind. Humanity is quite fractured, in fact, in the Rim where I am from, there are only four stellar nations that have more than one system. Systems are considered basically impregnable, we do not go around conquering each other because of the cost and infeasibility. As for tech, I think you may underestimate the level of industry I'd need to invent first just to reach a *basic* level of what I'm used to."

Sloane's eyes narrowed as she fell into thought. That was... that was so *interesting*, but he was wrong about one thing. "Of course, you're not going to immediately start fabricating circuitry needed for what I assume is your level. But, you can simply do what I've done and skip that. Magic the fuck out of it, and cheat."

"That... Isn't a terrible idea. But I, unfortunately, do not have access to magic," he said, adding a sigh filled with disappointment to punctuate his statement. "I take it you have pursued this direction of progress? Tell me, what's your story, Sloane?"

Sloane nodded and launched into sharing her own experiences and accomplishments. She spoke of the Runecard system and database she had created for the Banking Guild, briefly explaining how it worked. She described Tiberius, her falcon golem that boasted an intelligence almost akin to that of the animal he was designed after. She talked about her dabbling with weapons, such as her runic grenades and the caster, the gun-like device that fired spells.

She also delved into her significant advancements in the field of enchanting and runework, all of what she'd discovered about mana and magic and how it had influenced the Church's own stance. Sloane spoke not with arrogance, but with a sense of pride and satisfaction, trying to emphasize all of the hard work and dedication she had poured into her craft.

Haruto listened attentively, his eyes reflecting a mix of admiration and surprise. When Sloane finally finished, he shook his head, a look of genuine awe on his face. "I must say, I'm impressed," he admitted, his voice filled with respect. "I wish I'd undertaken even half of what you have."

Stefan cast a sidelong glance at Sloane, a subtle tilt of his head accompanying his words. “She’s been recognized and granted the title of baroness within the Kingdom of Blightwych,” he added, his tone carrying a note of pride.

Sloane snorted and acknowledged his statement with a raise of her glass. “There is that,” she admitted. “But it is simply a means to an end here.”

Haruto smiled, a hint of amusement in his eyes. “I’m simply a ‘lord’ within my kingdom,” he explained. “My personal family’s status is closer to what a landed knight would be considered on Eona. Alas, I have gained no great connections since arriving. However, as soon as the blockade lets up, or at least merchants are allowed to travel, I intend to travel to the Sovereign City of Parholm. I hear it is a more metropolitan city with people of all types converging there. With luck, my being a human will not be a strange occurrence. Mayhaps I will try my luck as a merchant.”

Sloane noticed that he referred to them as ‘humans’, not ‘terrans’. “Do you know where everyone is getting this ‘terran’ terminology from?” she asked, her brow furrowed in thought.

Haruto chuckled, shaking his head. “No idea, but I’ve met two varieties of terrans. Let’s just say they left quite an impression. Possibly the most arrogant people I’ve ever met. One from an empire, and one from a republic. Apparently, they believe that their nation will send rescue ships to this world to save them. The one from the republic even expressed sympathy to me, saying that perhaps his government would treat me as a refugee.”

Haruto’s words about the terrans he’d met brought a sigh from Sloane. “Including you, I’ve met only three humans,” she confessed, her voice tinged with a hint of frustration. “It seems everywhere I go, I just miss them. You said you met some from Earth, like me, any with children?” Her question hung in the air, a silent plea for any shred of hope.

Sloane subtly ignored Stefan’s pointed look, her attention firmly on Haruto as he pondered her question. She watched him closely, her heart pounding in her chest as she hoped, prayed, that he might have seen someone who could be her daughter, Gwyn.

“I’ve seen several children,” Haruto began, his voice thoughtful. He proceeded to describe them, their features, their mannerisms, and the way they clung to their parents in this strange new world. As he spoke, Sloane listened intently, her mind racing to match his descriptions with the image of Gwyn she held in her heart. But as he continued, a sinking feeling of disappointment settled in her stomach.

None of the children he described could be Gwyn.

The conversation gradually wound down as they finished their meal, the atmosphere around the table lightening considerably. Haruto was a pleasant companion, his stories and insights

providing a refreshing change of pace from their usual routine. As they pushed away their empty plates, Haruto leaned back in his chair, a satisfied smile on his face.

“I must say, this has been quite an enjoyable meeting,” he said, his gaze shifting between Sloane and Stefan. “I hope we can do this again before either of us depart.” His words were sincere, his smile genuine, and Sloane found herself nodding in agreement, she had enjoyed their conversation, and found comfort in the shared experiences and understanding.

With their goodbyes said, Sloane and Stefan left the tavern, stepping out into the cool evening air. The city was quiet as they made their way back to the safe house, their steps echoing softly in the deserted streets.

Upon their return to the safe house, the familiar sight of their companions greeted Stefan and Sloane. Nemura was seated at the table, her focus entirely on the meal before her, the clinking of her utensils against the plate a comforting background noise. Across the room, Yemina was engaged in a deep discussion with Mariel, their conversation filled with references to the Church and the duties of a priestess. The young raithe was listening attentively, her eyes wide with curiosity and determination.

She had been excited because her birthday was in a week, something Sloane resolved to treat the girl for, after all, it was the least she could do.

Fourteen.

She sighed.

Gwyn is going to be thirteen this year. During this season in fact...

Sloane shook her head, and moved into the room, heading to sit with Nemura. The two Blades assigned to their protection were seated in a corner, their voices low as they conversed over a shared drink.

Several bells had passed since their return, the safe house settling into a peaceful quiet as the night wore on. Mariel had long since fallen asleep, leaving the adults sitting in the main room or kitchen of the house.

Sloane was seated at the table, eating some cheese and bread, when the tranquility was shattered.

Without warning, the front door exploded inward, a shower of splintered wood and debris filling the room. The sudden, violent intrusion caught Sloane off guard, sending her sprawling to the floor.

All she could think about in that single moment was how her cheese was ruined.

In the doorway, a group of cultists appeared, their faces hidden behind masks, their bodies cloaked in dark robes. Among them, Sloane could see the telltale signs of mages, their hands glowing with mana as they prepared to cast.

Reacting instantly, Yemina and Nemura sprang into action, their weapons already drawn and ready. The paladin neatly used her shield to bash away a rock conjured and fired by one of the mages. As more cultists filed into the house, Stefan and the Blades surged to meet them.

Sloane quickly recovered, her hand closing around the hilt of her sword as she pushed herself to her feet. She pulled mana through her core, preparing her spells as she rushed forward, ready to join the fray.

Despite the surprise incursion, she felt a surge of adrenaline, her instincts kicking in as she prepared to defend their next not-so-safe house from yet another attack.

How are they constantly finding us?