
Weight of the World

“Sloane, wake up!”

The urgent voice pierced through Sloane's slumber, jolting her awake. Blinking against the morning light filtering through the curtains, she found Mariel standing at the foot of her bed, holding a tray with a look of anticipation. Sloane's eyes focused on the tray, taking in the perfectly poached eggs, golden-brown toast, and crispy bacon strips.

Rubbing her eyes, Sloane sat up, her sheets pooling around her waist. “What's the occasion?” she asked, her voice still thick with sleep.

Mariel's cheeks tinted a light pink. “No special reason. Just... a thank you. For everything you've done for me.” She hesitated, then added, “The servants gave me a hand. I mean, there's no way I could've made eggs look this good on my own.”

Sloane chuckled, her heart warmed by the gesture. “Aren't you supposed to be in that moody teenage phase? All brooding and defiant?”

Mariel rolled her eyes playfully, setting the tray on a nearby table. Sloane swung her legs over the bed, stretching her arms overhead, feeling the kinks in her muscles release. She padded over to the table, pulling out a chair.

She glanced at Mariel, who was watching her with a mix of pride and uncertainty. “Where's your plate?”

Mariel's face fell slightly. “I... didn't think that far ahead.”

Sloane gestured to the abundant breakfast spread. “Looks like there's plenty here for the both of us. Come on, let's share.”

The warm aroma of the food wafted between them as they settled into their chairs. Sloane, with practiced ease, began dividing the breakfast onto two plates, ensuring Mariel had a fair share. She then poured the root tea, its earthy scent mingling with the food. The tea wasn't for her, not really. It was a traditional remedy for young women like Mariel, who had recently started their monthlies. It was able to alleviate symptoms and balance hormones.

Traditions of this world, Sloane mused, sipping the tea. She didn't notice any significant change, but it had become a morning ritual, a shared moment with Mariel. Nemura, on the other hand, would chug her tea and dash out, always in a hurry.

Manabound - Resilience

Mariel's fork and knife moved rapidly, her appetite seemingly insatiable. Sloane watched her with a mix of amusement and concern. "Everything alright? You're eating like you've been starved."

Mariel paused, her cheeks slightly flushed. "I'm good. Just really hungry. What's the plan for today? Nemura mentioned she was off to test out your gift?"

Sloane nodded, her interest piqued. "Ah, the excerpt reader. I was thinking of heading to the center to craft another. Fancy joining me?"

Mariel's eyes sparkled with mischief. "If I come, can I get mine before Stefan?"

Sloane laughed, the sound light and genuine. "How about a deal? We try to make two before lunch. If we manage, you both get one today. Meanwhile, you can practice on your magic."

Mariel's enthusiasm was palpable. "Deal!"

She began devouring her food with renewed vigor.

"Mariel, dear," Sloane cautioned, her voice laced with concern. "Slow down. You're going to make yourself sick."

Mariel, her mouth full, tried to protest, but Sloane raised a finger. "Mar, no talking while eating."

Mariel exaggeratedly swallowed, grinning cheekily. "Better?"

Sloane shook her head, feigning exasperation. "Kids. The same, no matter where you go."

"So, you're saying you were just like me at my age?"

Sloane leaned in, her voice playful yet stern. "I'm saying, young lady, that if you keep up this level of sass, you'll find yourself on cleaning duty for a month."

Mariel's response was a wide, unrepentant smile before she returned to her breakfast.

Sloane picked up a piece of toast, layering it with a generous portion of her poached eggs. She took a bite, letting the flavors meld in her mouth. The cook they'd found in Nornport was truly a gem, and she'd regret parting ways with such talent.

As she chewed, her gaze settled on Mariel. The raithe girl had transformed remarkably over the past year. Sloane took a moment to appreciate the subtle changes. Mariel's hair, once barely presentable, now cascaded down her back, shimmering and well-maintained because of access to better quality products. *Thanks, Maud.* Her smooth grey skin, devoid of any blemishes, would be the envy of any human girl. The smattering of freckles across her cheeks added a touch of innocence to her features. But it was those ice-blue eyes, always brimming with hope, that tugged at Sloane's heartstrings. The way Mariel looked at her, filled with such trust and expectation, was both heartwarming and daunting.

Sloane couldn't deny that Mariel looked so much happier and healthier than when she'd first joined them. The transformation in Mariel was evident. Gone was the skittish girl who sought refuge in books, replaced by a young woman with a thirst for knowledge and a newfound confidence. Sloane felt a swell of pride knowing that their time together had played a part in Mariel's metamorphosis. The Church had done its part, but the resources and care of a noble House like Sloane's had made a discernible difference.

And that's what Sloane had become. She'd really leaned into the role, especially once the knights left.

Sloane's gaze drifted to the delicate necklace she had crafted for Mariel, which the girl wore with pride. Paired with the moonstone earrings—a gift from Lord Estos—they added a touch of elegance to her appearance. Sloane remembered Mariel's recent request for more piercings and the playful challenge for Sloane to join her. *Maybe some helix piercings would suit me. Just to be the edgy mom.*

Shit, I mean...

Shaking off the thought, Sloane refocused on the present. Ensuring that Mariel and everyone under her care had the best of everything was a responsibility she took seriously. It was the least she could do for them.

Mariel's gaze met Sloane's, her fork pausing midway to her mouth. She set it down slowly, a hint of concern clouding her gaze. "Is there something on my face?" she asked, her voice tinged with a mix of amusement and uncertainty.

Sloane chuckled softly, a pang of nostalgia hitting her. The phrase was a familiar one, a playful exchange she often shared with Gwyn. *Memories, always lurking around the corner.* "No, no. I was just..." She paused, choosing her words carefully. "Taking a moment to appreciate how much you've grown since we first met."

Mariel's cheeks turned a shade of deep crimson, her gaze dropping to her plate. But even as she tried to hide it, a pleased smile tugged at her lips. "T-Thanks, Sloane."

Sloane leaned forward, her tone shifting to a more somber note. "However, there's something I need to discuss. Later today, I have interviews scheduled with potential knights. We're hoping to find someone who aligns with our House's values and can assist Aila in managing things here once we leave. But after that..." She hesitated, taking a deep breath. *She deserves to know.* "I have a meeting with Praetor Laum."

Mariel's eyes sharpened, her previous warmth replaced by a cold edge. "Why would you need to meet with him?"

Manabound - Resilience

Sloane sighed, her fingers drumming on the table. “I’m not entirely sure. But Stefan mentioned your name came up during their conversation.”

The soft clatter of a fork hitting the plate echoed in the room as Mariel’s grip loosened. Her voice, when she spoke, was barely above a whisper, laced with fear. “Does he know about me? Is he planning to take me away? Sloane, promise me you won’t let him. I can’t—”

Sloane swiftly interjected, her voice firm yet gentle. “Mar, calm down. No one is taking you anywhere. Our plan remains unchanged. *We’re* escorting you to Calling.”

Mariel mumbled something under her breath, her gaze averted. Sloane’s eyebrows knitted in curiosity. “What did you say?”

“Nothing,” Mariel replied, a hint of defiance in her tone.

The atmosphere in the room grew heavy after their conversation, and the once enticing breakfast lost some of its appeal. Mariel pushed her plate away, her appetite clearly diminished. Sloane, sensing the need to lighten the mood, took a final bite of her bacon, savoring its crispy texture.

“Why don’t you go grab your stuff and we’ll head out? I’ll have them get the carriage for us.”

Mariel nodded and got up quietly. She took a step before hesitating and turning back around. She gave Sloane a look like she wanted to say something, but instead, she stepped forward and gave Sloane a hug.

Sloane smiled and squeezed her tight. “Let the maid know she can come in on your way out?”

“Sure,” she replied as she stepped back.

After she left, the maid came in to clean up and Sloane asked her to inform the driver to have the carriage ready. She quickly got ready, putting her hair in a single braid, and made her way out of the room where Mariel was waiting for her.

“You have everything you need for today?”

Mariel’s eyes brightened a bit as she nodded, patting her notebook. “All set. Time to go!”

Sloane’s lips curled into a smile, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “I’ve been thinking of experimenting with a new trait of mine. Fancy giving me a hand once we arrive?”

“Of course!”

“Perfect.”

As they approached the door, Vesper was waiting for them. Sloane raised an eyebrow, her gaze scrutinizing. “And just where have you been sneaking off to?”

Vesper responded with a distinctive “Meorroww!”

Sloane rolled her eyes, feigning annoyance, while Mariel's laughter filled the air, lightening the mood. The trio climbed into the carriage, with Sloane and Mariel settling together on one seat while Vesper took up the entirety of the other... and then some. A sharp knock from one of the guards signaled the driver, and they were on their way.



Sloane took a deep breath and activated [**Innovator's Archive**]. To her astonishment, a shimmering, ethereal bookshelf materialized right in front of her. It wasn't vast or sprawling, but its very presence was magical, almost otherworldly, but beautifully engraved with glowing runes and arcane designs. The edges of the bookshelf glowed faintly, casting a soft luminescence around it.

Aila and Mariel both gasped, their eyes wide with wonder. "By the gods, Sloane, what is that?" Aila whispered, her voice filled with awe.

"It's... It's my [**Innovator's Archive**]. I've never used it before," Sloane admitted, her voice filled with a mix of excitement and uncertainty.

Mariel, ever the curious one, stepped closer, reaching out to touch the bookshelf. But as her fingers neared, they met an invisible barrier that repelled her touch. She pulled back, a look of surprise on her face. "It won't let me touch it."

Sloane nodded, processing the new information. "It seems it's attuned only to me. Makes sense, I suppose."

Aila quickly chimed in, "Do you want to store something in it? I have some notebooks and a few reference books on gems I was going through. Might be a good start."

Sloane gratefully accepted the items from Aila and approached the [**Innovator's Archive**]. With a sense of reverence, she placed the notebooks and reference books onto the ethereal shelves. They settled in seamlessly as if they had always belonged there.

The trio watched in fascination, realizing the potential of this new tool. For Sloane, it was a step into a realm of magic she was only beginning to understand.

The ethereal glow of the [**Innovator's Archive**] dimmed as Sloane dismissed it, the magical structure spiraling inward, reminiscent of a star being sucked into a void. The room seemed momentarily darker without its luminescence. With a deep breath, she summoned it again. The archive reappeared with the books and notebooks still nestled within its shelves.

A triumphant grin spread across Sloane's face. "This... this is amazing," she murmured, her voice tinged with excitement. She turned to Aila, her eyes gleaming. "Do you realize what this means?"

“That there’s magic like this that we can exploit?”

Sloane chuckled, her laughter light and infectious. “Exactly. We need to understand this, replicate it, make it ours.”

This is just the beginning, she thought, feeling a surge of anticipation for the discoveries that lay ahead.

Mariel, clutching her cherished locked notebook, approached hesitantly. “Sloane, could you...?” She trailed off, her gaze fixed on the archive.

Understanding her unspoken request, Sloane nodded. “Of course, sweetie.” She carefully placed the notebook on the top shelf, where it adjusted itself, standing upright as if guarded by unseen forces. “Whenever you need it, just tell me.”

Mariel's eyes shone with gratitude. “I have more books. Personal ones.”

Sloane's laughter was warm. “We'll dedicate an evening to it. Organize everything. Make it our personal library.”

Mariel's excitement was evident. “And the reader?”

Sloane's gaze shifted to Aila, who was already prepping her workspace. “Shall we?”

Aila's smirk was all the answer she needed. “Everything's set for five readers. One for you and I, Stefan, Mariel, and the last? The Countess’s auction.”

Sloane raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Trust me, it’ll be highly sought after.”

Sloane nodded. “Let’s do it.”

Determined, Sloane approached the workbench, meticulously organized by Aila. She picked up her enchanting pen, feeling its familiar weight. *Perfect.*

Activating her traits, [**Runic Knowledge**], [**Artificer’s Insight**], and the newly acquired [**Master Tinkerer**], a rush of energy surged through her. Time seemed to stretch, each second elongating, allowing her to work with unparalleled precision. A chuckle escaped her lips, the realization of her new trait’s power dawning on her. It didn’t just make her efficient; it made her formidable.

With this, the world is truly at my fingertips.



The sun was high in the sky, casting a warm glow over the streets of Nornport as Sloane and Mariel exited the center and entered the carriage with Vesper in tow. They both looked out the windows as the bustling sounds of the Tradehaven district filled the air, with vendors calling out their wares and children laughing as they played.

Sloane glanced down at her right arm, where her newly assembled excerpt reader clung snugly. Its sleek design was both functional and aesthetically pleasing. Mariel, mirroring her, wore hers on her left arm, and both carried an air of accomplishment. The additional reader they held would soon find its home with Stefan, and Sloane felt a twinge of excitement at the thought of his reaction.

Aila had been excited about their prospects with the last reader. “Trust me,” she had said with a wink, “this will be a sensation.” Sloane had no doubt, but was glad that Stefan would be helping her. And she would be there too, just in case.

As they walked, Sloane’s thoughts shifted to the upcoming meeting. Three knights, each with their own set of skills and experiences, were to be interviewed. The prospect of expanding her House’s strength was both exhilarating and daunting.

Choosing the right person is crucial.

She probably should have invited Aila, but decided that the second meeting could be with her.

Mariel, sensing the shift in Sloane’s mood, nudged her gently. “Nervous about the interviews?”

Sloane smiled, appreciating the girl’s perceptiveness. “A bit. It’s a big decision. But with you and Stefan by my side, I feel more confident.”

Mariel grinned. “We’ve got this. But first, food! I’m starving.”

Sloane chuckled. “Always thinking with your stomach. Let’s head home, grab a bite, and prepare. Stefan will want to go over the details before the knights arrive.”

The carriage rolled smoothly along Noble Way, the street lined with the residences of Nornport’s elite. Each house was a statement of its owner’s wealth and influence, but Sloane’s residence had a distinct aura of its own. As they approached, the grand archway loomed ahead, its gates swung open in welcome. The emblem of House Reinhart, freshly painted, adorned the top of the arch, signaling their arrival.

Driving through, the cobblestone courtyard stretched out before them, meticulously maintained and gleaming in the midday sun. The bubbling fountain at its center added a serene touch, its gentle splashes harmonizing with the distant chatter of the house staff and the clatter of preparations.

The carriage came to a gentle stop, and Sloane stepped out, taking a moment to appreciate the surroundings. The familiarity of home was comforting, especially with the impending meetings weighing on her mind.

Mariel, too, seemed to bask in the ambiance, her gaze lingering on the fountain's dancing waters. "It's always so peaceful here," she remarked.

Sloane nodded in agreement. "It is. Now, let's eat quickly. We've got a busy afternoon ahead."

Inside, the dining hall was a symphony of aromas. The kitchen staff had outdone themselves, and a spread of delectable dishes awaited them. Roasted meats, fresh salads, and a variety of pastries were laid out, making Mariel's eyes widen in delight. They indulged in a bit of everything, allowing themselves a brief respite before the day's challenges.

Once their meal was concluded, Sloane led Mariel to the library, a spacious room lined with shelves of books, its large windows letting in ample light. A round table at the center was set with chairs and writing materials, ready for their meetings.

Stefan joined them shortly. "All set?" he asked. "The knights will be here soon."

Sloane nodded. "As I'll ever be. Let's get this done."

His eyes darted to her wrist and tilted his head. Sloane smirked. "Don't worry, I have yours too."

He smiled. "I wasn't going to say anything."

"I know you've been anxious since last night. I'm sure Nemura rubbed it in your face, didn't she?"

"You have no idea."

"I have mine!" Mariel blurted out as she thrust out her wrist.

Sloane smiled as Stefan's face scrunched up, but then she got serious and prepared herself.

As the first knight was ushered into the library, the other two were guided to the parlor, where they'd wait their turn, a guard ensuring order and decorum. The afternoon was set to be a defining one for House Reinhart.

Sloane, with Stefan on her left, and Mariel taking notes on her right, prepared to meet the potential knights. Each candidate would be evaluated on their merits, but Sloane also sought something deeper, a connection or understanding that would make them a true fit for House Reinhart.

Ser Solette, a sun elf woman with deep mahogany skin and high cheekbones, was the first to enter. Her posture was impeccable, and her eyes held a determined glint. From Stefan's notes, Sloane

knew she hailed from a long line of Rosalian knights and had earned her title after an honorable stint with the royal army.

When asked why she wished to join House Reinhart, Ser Solette's response was candid. "A new House like yours within the kingdom is an opportunity one shouldn't miss. As one of the higher-status Houses within the city, it provides an opportunity for me to learn and gain status," she admitted.

They discussed the woman's qualifications and experience, learning that while she had ample time in martial roles, she had spent a relatively short stint as an adjunct for a higher-ranked officer. It seemed that she would likely not be the best choice to run things here.

Taking a chance, Sloane posed another question, "I will soon be departing Nornport for a very long time. Would you consider joining me?"

Ser Solette nodded without hesitation. "Of course, if you were my liege, it would be my duty."

There's potential there. One more thing.

"Would you be willing to take orders from someone who isn't a knight if I, as your liege, required it?"

The knight considered this. "On occasion, perhaps. Such situations arose in the army. But I believe my status as a knight should be acknowledged."

Sloane winced internally. It made sense, but it would not fit with what she needed. Nemura had her trust, and the experience. Anyone they brought would need to answer to her.

After another quarter bell of questions and discussion, Stefan leaned in, whispering to Sloane, "Perhaps she isn't our best fit."

Sloane nodded in agreement, thanking Ser Solette for her time and wishing her well. The woman was professional when she wished Sloane well and stood up to depart.

"That was tense!" Mariel said as the door shut behind the woman while a maid escorted her out.

Sloane smiled.

The door opened again, revealing Ser Liora. She was a telv with a rich, dark tan complexion, her physique slender and graceful, hinting at a life of both discipline and agility. Her eyes, sharp and observant, scanned the room before settling on Sloane.

Her background was intriguing; she hailed from the Sovereign Cities and had been wandering, seeking a place to belong. When posed the same question about joining House Reinhart, her answer was heartfelt. "I want to find a home, to work diligently, and to carve out a new life. I promise to give my all and transform this House into the haven I've been searching for."

They continued their discussion, and with every answer, Sloane found herself liking the woman. While only in her late twenties... *shit when did that seem so young?* ...she'd spent much of that working for a city lord in one of the Cities. When she expressed a desire to find somewhere new, he released her from his service.

There was a raw sincerity in Ser Liora's words that resonated with Sloane. *There's something about her. A kindred spirit, perhaps?*

Lastly, Ser Roghan, a tall and imposing orkun man with a stern face but kind eyes, entered. His reputation as a tournament champion preceded him. Like Solette, while he was undoubtedly skilled in combat, Sloane sensed he might not be the best fit for administrative duties. It almost made the decision for her.

Still, as they continued their discussion, Stefan discreetly suggested, "He might be valuable when we depart." Sloane nodded, storing the thought away for later consideration.

After the interviews, Sloane felt a clear inclination towards Ser Liora. Offering her the position, the telv woman's relief was more than apparent. She knelt, offering a knight's pledge of service to Baroness Sloane and House Reinhart.

Accepting the oath, Sloane outlined Ser Liora's responsibilities. "Once I depart, you'll act as the steward of this manor, transforming it into an embassy for House Reinhart throughout Rosale. Collaborate closely with Aila Iliric to ensure the Reinhart Center's success."

"Yes, milady. I look forward to working with you and House Reinhart. When do you expect to depart?"

"I am not sure, but it could be as soon as spring, or as late as the summer. It all depends on what occurs over winter."

The telv woman nodded and saluted her. "I will make sure everything is ready. I suspect I will work with Master Stefan until he departs with you?"

"Yes. He'll also get you set up with a temporary room within the manor."

"Thank you, milady. I will get started at once."

Sloane smiled.

Stefan looked at her. "I will take her around. I have to run by the Banking Guild as well. Meet with you later? Will you be alright with the paladin alone?"

Sloane nodded. "Yes, I'll have Vesper with me. I'm not worried."

Ser Liora's eyes narrowed. "Paladin?"

"I'll explain as we go," Stefan promised.

She nodded hesitantly.

As they departed, Sloane let out a breath and rubbed her temples. *That was easy, now for the tough part.*

Mariel leaned closer. “What... what do you want me to do?”

Sloane gave the girl a long look. The hope on her face was mixed with some fear. Fear that she would have to leave them.

Sloane didn't want her to go.

She'd fight the man if she had to.

“Go to your room, nothing will happen today, but maybe don't work on your magic.” Mariel nodded hesitantly and Sloane looked at Vesper. “You're with me you lazy cat. Invisible. If he threatens... you know what to do.”

A low growl rumbled from the cat.

She stood and turned back to Mariel, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Everything will be fine. You're with us. You were entrusted to me. Not him. He can huff and puff, but nothing he does will take you away unless you want it. So, let me ask... do you want it? He may be able to get you where you're supposed to go earlier than I can. We'll be here until—”

“No!” Mariel interrupted. “No, I want to stay with you. I don't...” She sniffled. “I don't want to leave you.”

Sloane nodded. “Then that's what we'll do. I'll come up after and we'll organize my archive, alright? Just you and me.”

Mariel gave her a small smile and Sloane pulled her in for a hug.

Everything would be fine.



Several bells later, Sloane was alone in the parlor, the room dimly lit by the soft glow of the chandeliers. The gentle hum of the mansion was interrupted when a guard entered, leading Praetor Laum with him. The man, with his greying hair and dark skin, looked as if he had been through a lot. His eyes, though weary, held a sharpness that spoke of his experience.

“Good evening, Praetor,” Sloane greeted, her voice even.

“Baroness Reinhart,” he replied curtly.

She thanked the sun elf guard who swiftly left the room and shut the door quietly behind himself. She gestured towards the decanter on the table. “Care for a drink?”

He declined with a slight shake of his head. Sloane motioned towards the plush chairs, and he took a seat, his posture rigid.

“I was informed you wished to speak with me,” Sloane began as sat opposite of him.

Praetor Laum took a moment before speaking, “We apprehended a group of cultists attempting to enter the city. They’re searching for a raithe girl, claiming she’s the Avatar of Tenera.”

Sloane’s eyebrow arched subtly. “And your point is?”

“They knew her by name. Mariel Lunaris. They allege she’s a priestess, kidnapped from the temple of Marketbol by a terran baroness.”

Sloane’s voice held a hint of amusement. “Cultists often spout nonsense, especially when confronted. In fact, I do believe they would say anything. Especially, since we fought them. As you’re well aware.”

“Is the girl a priestess, Baroness?”

“She is not a *priestess*. She has been entrusted into our care and will remain under my protection until she reaches her intended destination.”

“And where might that be?”

“With respect, I don’t owe you explanations. I don’t know you.”

Laum’s eyes narrowed. “I believe I’ve proven my trustworthiness when I proved knowing Praetor Shalas.”

Sloane’s retort was swift, “Knowing someone does not prove that you should be trusted. Trust is earned, not given. I thought all paladins were trustworthy until I saw another Praetor impale the one paladin I had grown to trust without a shadow of doubt over the course of a year.”

Silence reverberated around the room as the paladin’s fists opened and closed. He took a deep breath. “You tread dangerous waters, Baroness,” Laum warned. “You would not want—”

The room’s atmosphere grew even more charged as black mana began to swirl in Sloane’s [Mana Sense]. The surroundings seemed to warp and waver like heat rising off sun-baked ground that caused the Praetor to halt mid-threat. This distortion, a bending of light, grew more pronounced, centering on a particular spot, and then, as if a mirage was solidifying into tangible reality, Vesper emerged.

The black mana that had cloaked her in invisibility melted away, leaving the formidable feline fully present and imposing. She stood right in front of the Praetor with her two appendages and their crystal apertures glowing with a subtle mist of arcane power.

Laum's eyes widened in shock, his every muscle tensing. His hand instinctively darted towards his sword, but Sloane's voice, firm and commanding, halted him. "No, let's not do that. I am no enemy of the Church or your Holy Order, Praetor Laum. But given recent events, I trust no one outside my inner circle. I'm grateful you apprehended those cultists. It saves me the trouble of killing them myself."

Laum's gaze flitted between the massive form of Vesper and Sloane, his expression a mix of wariness and indignation. "You are a terran, so I'll overlook your audacity. But understand that our duty is sacred. If I discover you're holding that girl against her will..."

Sloane's voice was icy. "You won't. Mariel is a trusted member of my House. She's under my protection. I will lay down my life for her, Praetor. No one will lay a finger on her while I still breathe."

The Praetor, though clearly unsettled, maintained his composure. He gave Vesper a wary glance. The massive feline, sensing the tension, took a couple of steps back, but her two appendages remained alert, tracking the man's every move. "Then I suppose our conversation is at an end for now. I trust you won't be leaving the city anytime soon?"

Sloane's reply was curt. "I will not."

He nodded, his gaze lingering on Vesper for a moment longer. "Then I expect we'll be speaking again soon."



The weight of the day pressed heavily on Sloane's shoulders as she descended the staircase of the manor. The soft glow of the evening lanterns did little to lift her spirits.

She had spent the better part of the evening with Mariel, their fingers brushing over pages and spines as they organized the **[Innovator's Archive]**. Their laughter and shared moments of discovery had been a balm, a reminder of the bond that was slowly, but surely, deepening between them.

She knew that the young raithe girl wasn't just seeking a mentor or a protector. She was yearning for something more profound, something Sloane had been hesitant to acknowledge.

Mariel's subtle cues, the way her eyes lingered on Sloane during their quieter moments, the slight inflection in her voice when she called out to her, or when she wanted nothing more than to just

be hugged—all these hinted at a deeper need. She looked for Sloane to fill a more maternal role in her life.

Sloane had known it for some time and even found herself falling into the role more often as of late. The occasional slip-up from the both of them... It was something she'd grappled with and struggled to accept because of a fear of what it would mean. But it was becoming more and more apparent with every interaction.

The thought was daunting, but also strangely comforting.

Sloane was starting to believe that she wouldn't be betraying Gwyn by helping another girl who was clearly in need.

She just wished she knew that Gwyn was alright. Maybe that would give her the solace that she required to make a decision. Because it seemed more and more like Mariel did not want to leave them.

And Sloane wasn't sure if she could take the girl away from all she knew.

But if she wants it?

She didn't know and that unknown hurt.

But as she reached the bottom of the stairs, the entrance doors swung open, revealing Stefan. The moment their eyes met, a silent exchange took place. His gaze, usually so composed, now bore an unmistakable edge of urgency. The lines on his face seemed deeper, his posture slightly hunched, as if he carried a heavy burden.

Something's wrong.

She straightened, pushing aside her fatigue. "What is it?" she demanded, her voice sharper than intended.

Stefan hesitated, taking a moment to collect himself. "I've been at the Banking Guild for the past several bells. I've uncovered something... significant."

Sloane's heart rate quickened. She motioned towards the parlor. "Let's talk there."

They moved in tandem, the atmosphere thick with tension. Once inside the parlor, Stefan poured them both a drink, the amber liquid shimmering in the dim light. They took their seats, the plush chairs offering little comfort given the situation.

Sloane took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing thoughts. She leaned forward and turned to him. "What is it? Are we alright on funds?"

He nodded. "Yes, nothing out of the ordinary there, but apparently your House name has been given a designator."

Her head tilted in confusion. "What do you mean?"

“It took some... questioning, but I was able to gather that it means that your House Reinhart... isn’t the only House Reinhart. There’s another one.”

The world froze. Everything that had been weighing on her, the weight of the world that had kept her exhausted. The expectations and needs. It all went out the window with those three words.

Sloane's heart thudded loudly in her chest, each beat echoing the weight of Stefan's words. The dim light of the parlor seemed to grow dimmer, the shadows deeper. She felt a cold chill creep up her spine, her fingers gripping the armrests of her chair.

“Another House Reinhart?” Her voice was barely above a whisper, the words catching in her throat. “Do you mean... Gwyn?”

Stefan's gaze was heavy with concern. “I don't know for sure, Sloane. But the possibility is there.”

She tried to swallow, but her throat felt dry. “Where is this other House? Tell me, Stefan.”

He hesitated, his fingers drumming on the armrest. “That's the problem. I don't know. I tried to force the issue. I was... insistent, to put it mildly. I even involved Toren, hoping his influence might sway them. But the guild here in Nornport simply doesn't have that information. We're a minor location, and they don't keep extensive records.”

Stefan's jaw tightened. “I tried to send a courier to Marketbol to gather more information, but the courier's guild is not accepting any deliveries outside of the city until Spring.”

Sloane's eyes widened in disbelief. “Spring? That's fucking ten weeks away! Why the delay?”

“It's winter, and they wouldn't budge on the issue. No matter how much gold I promised.”

Sloane's eyes widened in disbelief. “So, we're in the dark? We don't even know where this other House is?”

Stefan shook his head. “It's not in Rosale. That much I'm sure of. Even though Nornport isn't a significant hub, if there was another House Reinhart here, we'd know. Our best bet is to either wait for word from Marketbol or get to Calling in the Spring. The Guild there would have more extensive records and more information. Hopefully.”

Sloane's mind raced, a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions. *Gwyn, alive? But where? And why another House Reinhart? What does—*

Wait, that means she's a noble? How..?

She took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to calm herself. “We need to leave now, Stefan. I need to know if it's her.”

The room seemed to close in as Stefan's face grew even more somber, the lines of his face deepening with concern. "Sloane," he began, "I can't truly grasp the depth of your emotions right now, the maternal instincts pulling at you. But I need you to understand that the impending winter on Ikios is treacherous. I share your urgency, truly, I do. But it's imperative we wait until winter passes. We can use this time to prepare, to strategize. When spring breaks and the snow recedes, we'll set out. I promise you, I'm not trying to keep you from Gwyn."

Sloane's gaze met his, her vision blurred by tears she hadn't even felt forming. "Every fiber of my being is screaming to go now, Stefan. I can feel it in my bones... It's her. Why is fate so cruel?"

Stefan rose from his chair, kneeling in front of her, his hands enveloping hers in a gesture of solidarity. "I know, Sloane. I see the pain, the hope, the desperation in your eyes. But you must understand that rushing headlong into danger won't help Gwyn. We still have Mariel to think of, and the Banking Guild in Calling might have the answers we need. Our path might change based on what we learn. We could be closer to Gwyn than we think."

Sloane nodded absently. She felt... she didn't know how she felt. There was so much filling her, and all of the day's emotions came crashing on her like a snowball that had finally turned into an avalanche.

The room was thick with tension, the kind that makes the air feel heavy and time seem to slow. Sloane and Stefan sat opposite each other, the space between them filled with the weight of unspoken emotions and the magnitude of the revelation. The mere hint that Gwyn might be alive, somewhere in this vast world, was a lifeline Sloane had known she was desperate for. Now it was a glimmer of hope, but it also brought with it a torturous uncertainty that gnawed at her heart.

The silence stretched, becoming almost palpable. Sloane's eyes, usually so sharp and focused, were distant, lost in a tumult of memories and what-ifs. All the nights she cried herself to sleep wondering what Gwyn was doing, wondering what she could do more... Missing her daughter's birthdays... A daughter who was thirteen now.

She'd missed so much. She'd wanted to be there, to teach her magic, to take her somewhere safe. To experience all of her joys and wonder that this new reality had to offer.

The dam of emotions she'd built over the past two and a half years, brick by brick, tear by tear, began to show cracks. The pressure behind it grew, threatening to burst forth.

And then, it did.

Tears, hot and unchecked, streamed down her face. Her body convulsed with sobs, each one wringing out the pain, the hope, the relentless yearning she'd held onto. The pride that her daughter, her Gwyn, might have carved out a place in this treacherous world surged within her, mingling with the torrent of her emotions.

Oxylus

All this time... all these seasons, these endless nights...

The realization that there was another House Reinhart was like a beacon in the darkest night. It wasn't just a name. It was a sign, a symbol that Gwyn, against all conceivable odds, had risen, and had become a noble in her own right.

I can't wait to see how she managed that. To thank whoever helped her. I will give them the world for keeping my baby safe.

A fierce, maternal pride welled up in Sloane. Overpowering the storm of her emotions. *My Gwyn, my little fighter. She's made her mark, just like I taught her. How could I have ever doubted her strength? Her resilience?*

The night deepened, but even when Sloane returned to her bed, sleep eluded her. She lay in bed, the sheets cold against her skin as her mind raced. Every creak of the manor, every rustle of the wind outside, seemed to whisper Gwyn's name. She couldn't rest, not now. Not when her daughter was out there, waiting to be found.

Gwyn is out there. This time I'm certain.

She would use this time, this agonizing wait, to prepare. To sharpen every blade, to strengthen every spell, to craft every tool in order to fortify those under her. She would make them unbreakable because when the snow melted and the path cleared, there would be no stopping her. They would set out, and she would continue until they found her.

There will be no more waiting, no more tears.

I will tear the gods from the sky and earth if I have to.