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## Strengthening Bonds

“Are you sure about this place, Nemura?” she asked, her voice tinged with doubt. “I mean, it looks like the kind of place where I’m going to get mugged. Or worse...” she murmured, her voice trailing off as darker possibilities flitted through her mind.

Sloane eyed the establishment before her with a mix of skepticism and trepidation. The bar’s dimly lit entrance, combined with its worn-out sign swinging precariously overhead, gave it the appearance of one of those gritty portside taverns she’d read about in novels back on Earth.

She mentally kicked herself for leaving Vesper behind with Mariel, but it had been the smart thing to do, especially since Stefan was out on House business. The protective presence of her feline golem would have been reassuring right about now.

Nemura, seemingly unfazed by the bar’s exterior, turned to Sloane with an amused smirk. “Trust me, you’re tougher than you look,” she said, her tone teasing.

Sloane raised an eyebrow, her lips quirking into a half-smile. “I... I don’t think you know how compliments work, Nemura.”

Nemura chuckled, her laughter light and infectious. “I’m sure you’d appreciate it if I didn’t lie to you.” With a confident stride, she led the way into the bar, with Sloane hesitantly following close behind.

*I’m sure you’d appreciate it if I didn’t lie to you~ she says.*

As Sloane stepped through the creaky door, she was greeted by an atmosphere that was, if possible, only marginally better than the exterior had promised. The lighting was dim, casting shadows that danced across the worn wooden floor. A haze of pipe smoke hung in the air, mingling with the scent of ale and the sea. The patrons were a motley crew of sailors and wanderers, representing a diversity of races that seemed to defy the bar’s outward appearance.

Sun elves made up the majority, their pointed ears and lithe forms easily distinguishable even in the dim light. Telv were also there in abundance, but there was also a healthy smattering of orkun, raithe, and high elves. Surprisingly, dwarves were present, their stout forms and bushy beards a stark contrast to the more delicate Loreni features. Sloane even spotted a moon elf or two, their silvery hair and purple skin shimmering in the low light.

As she walked by behind Nemura, a boisterously laughing dwarf man slapped the back of a sitting orkun woman. Sloane braced for a confrontation, but instead, the orkun woman grabbed the much smaller dwarf and yanked him in for a deep kiss.

Sloane blinked, momentarily stunned.

*Well, that's one way to resolve tension.*

Further along, a raithe sailor was arm-wrestling with a high elf, their faces red with exertion and alcohol. The crowd around them cheered and jeered, money exchanging hands faster than Sloane could follow. Just when it looked like the elf was about to win, the raithe let out a guttural shout and slammed the elf's hand down onto the table. The crowd erupted into a mix of cheers and groans, and the raithe stood up, flexing his muscles and basking in his victory, quickly followed by him grabbing a drink from a bystander and sliding it to the high elf.

Nemura led Sloane toward the bar, where a sun elf man was sitting on a stool, flanked by two empty seats. The former Fist paused behind him, her towering presence casting a shadow over the elf. He began to turn, annoyance flashing across his face, likely ready to deliver a snide remark. But as he looked up—and up—at Nemura, his expression quickly shifted from annoyance to something resembling awe, or perhaps fear. Nemura's eyes darted pointedly to the stool behind him. Taking the hint, he nodded hastily and vacated the seat as if it were on fire.

Nemura took the now-empty stool with a satisfied nod and gestured for Sloane to sit beside her. Sloane took her seat, still taking in the bar's eclectic atmosphere.

*This place is like a living, breathing character study. And if nothing else, it's certainly not boring.*

Nemura's gaze locked onto the bartender's, a silent communication passing between them. With a nod, the bartender began preparing two drinks. Sloane watched the interaction, her eyes darting between the two. The ambient noise of the bar seemed to fade as she took in the scene, her senses heightened.

She leaned slightly closer to Nemura and whispered, keeping her voice low, "You come here often?"

Nemura smirked, her eyes still on the bartender. "Enough to be known, not enough to be predictable."

Sloane chuckled softly.

The two of them, in this rough-around-the-edges establishment, stood out and yet fit in perfectly. They were both women who had faced their fair share of challenges, and the world had a habit of underestimating them. *Well, at least me.*

Sloane knew better.

She had seen Nemura in action.

The bartender slid two mugs across the counter, the amber liquid inside catching the dim light. Sloane picked up her drink, raising it slightly towards Nemura. “To unexpected adventures and the formidable women we share them with.”

Nemura clinked her glass against Sloane's, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “And to those foolish enough to underestimate us.”

Sloane's brows rose in surprise as the rich flavor of the ale danced on her tongue. She paused, mug hovering just below her lips, and shot a glance at Nemura, who was watching her with an amused smirk.

“Holy shit, Nemura,” Sloane exclaimed, her voice filled with genuine appreciation.

“Told you. They brew their own special blend here.”

Sloane took another sip, savoring the taste. “How the hell did you know I'd love this?”

Nemura leaned onto the bar, her eyes scanning Sloane from head to toe. “You're an ale-drinking woman, not one of those fruity bitches. I respect it.”

Sloane laughed, shaking her head. “We really need to work on your compliment game, but I'll take it. I blame Oktoberfest back home. I've always loved that style of beer.”

Nemura's brow furrowed in curiosity. “Oktober-what now? Your language...”

Sloane waved it away. “Yeah... it took me longer than I'd admit, but I eventually figured out that there's some magical shenanigans helping me understand Common.”

“Huh. That's... interesting.”

“Anyways, Oktoberfest. It's this massive beer festival in a city about five hours away from where Gwyn and I lived. Imagine tents upon tents, filled with people from all over the world, all gathered to celebrate and drink beer. It's been a tradition for over two centuries.”

Nemura's eyes sparkled with interest. “Sounds like my kind of festival. Your world seems to have so many intriguing customs.”

Sloane's smile softened. “It does. And I can't wait to explore all that your world has to offer once we find Gwyn. Speaking of festivals, what about Vlaredia? Any special celebrations there?”

Nemura's face brightened. “Ah, the Festival of the Hunt at the onset of Autumn. It's in honor of Thezmos, our God of the Hunt. There are archery contests, tales of legendary hunts, and, of course, plenty of drinking. At the festival's end, people show their gratitude to the hunters with handcrafted animal figurines. It's a great time usually.”

Sloane leaned forward, intrigued. “The only festival I’ve gone to here was the Festival of Hearth we went to a few weeks ago. It was... decent, but nothing too memorable.”

“Rosale’s real party is the Festival of Love in Spring.”

Sloane raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like our Valentine’s Day.”

Nemura smirked. “It’s when everyone who got knocked up during winter, announces their upcoming arrivals. Many tie the knot, while the singles scout for potential partners.”

Sloane laughed, imagining the scene. “Sounds lively. Do you ever miss those times back in Vlaredia?”

Her friend’s gaze turned distant, her eyes clouded with memories. “That was a sudden shift in topic,” she remarked, her voice low.

Sloane hesitated, her fingers playing with the rim of her mug. “I’ve noticed you rarely speak of home. I just wondered...”

Nemura took a long pull from her drink, her eyes never leaving Sloane’s. “It’s a tender wound, even now. I wasn’t in Thirdghyll long before you came along. But...” She trailed off, her eyes searching Sloane’s for understanding.

Sloane leaned forward, her voice gentle. “You don’t owe me any explanations, Nemura. If it’s too painful—”

She held up a hand, silencing her. “No, it’s time I shared. We’ve faced so much together.” She inhaled deeply, her chest rising and falling with the effort. “I was raised in Josiada, a large town near Ror’Urba, the capital. After my studies at Ror University, I joined the Imperial Army. My dedication and skills saw me rise through the ranks, eventually joining the Empire’s Fist. But a few years before our paths crossed, my team was dispatched to quell a supposed rebellion in the north.”

Sloane’s heart raced, sensing the gravity of what was to come. She took a sip of her ale but kept focused on the woman next to her.

Nemura’s voice grew colder, her words measured. “What we found wasn’t a rebellion. It was desperation. They were starving. A clan exploiting their own people, demanding more even as raiders pillaged their lands. The people resisted, and they won. We were summoned.”

Sloane felt a chill run down her spine. *I can see where this is headed.*

Nemura’s eyes darkened, her voice tinged with a bitterness that Sloane had rarely heard. “I used my authority to challenge the clan head to a trial by combat. Honor dictated it. But the bastard refused, opting to send his men to do his dirty work instead.”

As Nemura spoke, her fist clenched around her mug so tightly that her knuckles whitened. Sensing the emotional weight of the moment, Sloane reached over and laid her hand gently over

Nemura's clenched fist. Nemura's breath hitched, her eyes dropping to their hands. She seemed to wrestle with something internally before closing her eyes briefly, as if gathering the strength to continue.

"We had no choice but to fight. When the dust settled, I personally executed the clan head. I intended to install his heir, to give the people a chance at proper leadership. But then the heir challenged me, and it was as if madness had infected the entire clan. More fighting, more death. When we returned, I was branded a traitor. My rank was stripped, and I was denied even the chance to defend myself. I requested a discharge, but it was only partially granted. Lieutenant Commander Ressa Ka'ai, my detachment leader, approved it, but higher-ups overruled her. That was the last straw. I deserted that very night, evading the team sent to retrieve me, and eventually found my way to Thirdghyll."

Sloane felt a complex swirl of emotions: anger at the injustice Nemura had faced, admiration for her courage, and a deepening sense of trust and camaraderie. *She's been through hell, and yet here she is, standing by my side in what must seem like an impossible quest.*

Struggling to find the right words, Sloane tightened her grip on Nemura's hand. "I can't even begin to imagine what you've been through, but I want you to know how much I trust you. Your honor, your judgment—they mean everything. I know how impossible it must seem to others, but you've never doubted my search for Gwyn, not once. You're a true friend, Nemura."

Nemura's eyes met Sloane's, a mixture of vulnerability and gratitude in her gaze. She twisted her hand to return Sloane's squeeze. "Thank you, Sloane. And to answer your original question—yes, I do miss home. I left without saying goodbye to my family. They were told of my supposed dishonor, and I can only hope they'll find it in their hearts to forgive me one day."

Sloane's voice was firm. "If they know you, truly know you, they already have."

Nemura's gaze lingered on their hands for a moment longer before she looked up, her eyes searching Sloane's face. "Sloane?"

*Ah, shit. I went too far again.*

"Nemura, wait. I'm sorry."

The taller woman paused, her posture tense. "It's not just that, Sloane. I respect you deeply, and I'm aware of your feelings. I've often used humor to mask my own emotions, but I'm grateful you've never exploited that. I am respectful that you've taken it slow."

*What?*

Sloane blinked, taken aback. "What are you talking about?"

Nemura met Sloane's gaze, her eyes searching for understanding. Seeing Sloane's genuine confusion, she muttered a soft, "Oh, fuck."

Her cheeks turned a deep shade of crimson, and she buried her face in her hands, clearly mortified.

“Nemura? What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I... I overstepped. Made assumptions that weren’t mine to make.”

Sloane’s heart raced. “Nemura, please. Explain.”

Taking a deep breath, Nemura looked up, her eyes filled with vulnerability. She grabbed her mug, downing its contents in one go, then signaled the bartender for a refill. “Relationships... they’ve never been my strong suit.”

Sloane’s heart sank as realization dawned. *Oh, no. I’ve been so blind.*

“Fuck.”

Nemura continued her voice barely above a whisper. “I thought... I thought the signs were there. But you even mentioned otherwise when we discussed Lord Estos. I misread you and assumed you were sending me signals, thought you were simply not interested in men...”

Sloane sucked in a breath. “Nemura, I...”

“It’s alright. I apologize—”

“No, please. Let me speak.”

Nemura nodded.

Sloane took a deep breath, choosing her words carefully. “Nemura, I genuinely believed we were just joking around. I never thought it was anything more. I’m truly sorry if I led you on. My priority has always been finding my daughter. Everything else comes second.”

She paused as the bartender slid another ale to Nemura and Sloane drank from hers as Nemura drained the second mug.

Nemura nodded, her gaze distant. “I understand. And I’m sorry for misinterpreting things.”

Sloane sighed, feeling the weight of the moment. “It’s not that I’m against relationships. It’s just... It’s been so long. I haven’t been with anyone since Gwyn’s father...”

Nemura’s voice softened. “What happened to him?”

“He died. Doing what he loved. Serving his country. In a way, it was something quite similar to what the Empire’s Fist does. My government lied about what happened and they refused to tell me anything regarding it. I know what he did was classified, but... I felt like I had a right to know *something*. Instead, I had to learn about it on the news. When I went to find out if it was true, they still lied. I took Gwyn and we left. I sold my home, sold everything and we moved to another country.”

A deep understanding crossed over Nemura's face as she took a deep breath. "Seems we have more in common than I thought."

Sloane smiled weakly. "Except you're a fierce warrior, and I... I just tinker."

"You know, there's a warrior inside of you too," Nemura said as she tapped Sloane's chest over her heart. "I see it when you fight. You use your mind in ways that I could never. You are an amazing woman, Sloane. It's what... attracted me to you."

She watched as those hopeful, golden eyes quietly searched her, gauging her for any reactions.

But it was for something Sloane couldn't give.

Meeting Nemura's intense gaze, a mixed feeling of gratitude and regret filled her. "I'm sorry, Nemura. My daughter comes first. The guilt would eat me alive, not to mention that I still don't know if she's alive or alright... I need to ensure her safety before I can think about my own future."

Nemura nodded without hesitation, but Sloane could see the signs of how hard the rejection had hit her. "I get it," she said slowly, but then her resolve returned and she nodded again. "And I'll be right beside you, ensuring that that future becomes a reality."

The ambient noise of the bar faded into the background as Sloane and Nemura settled into a comfortable silence, each lost in their own thoughts. The clinking of glasses and the low hum of conversations surrounded them, but for a moment it felt like they were in their own world. Sloane's fingers traced circles on the bar, her mind wandering until a sudden realization made her sit up straighter.

"Hey Nemura," Sloane began, her voice tinged with excitement, "I've got something for you." She reached down into her satchel and retrieved a cloth-wrapped object. With a small smile, she slid it across the bar towards the teal woman.

Nemura's golden eyes darted between the mysterious bundle and Sloane, her brow furrowing in curiosity. "What's this?"

Sloane's grin widened. "Why don't you find out?"

With a playful roll of her eyes, Nemura carefully unwrapped the cloth, revealing the bracer fitted with the sleek design of the excerpt reader. Sloane watched her intently, eager to gauge her reaction.

"I tested it already," Sloane explained, unable to keep the pride out of her voice. "Took me a while to figure out how to disconnect it from my own mana signature, but I managed. I should have thought of that before testing it, but hey, all good. This is the first true version of its kind, and I wanted you to have it."

Nemura looked genuinely touched. "Sloane... thank you."

Sloane winked. “I told you. My best girl deserves the best gear, right?”

A soft, almost rueful chuckle escaped Nemura’s lips, but she kept her thoughts to herself. Sloane’s anticipation was killing her. “Go on, try it!”

With a nod, she slowly slid the device onto her left forearm, adjusting it so the screen faced inward. She tightened the laces as she examined the material thoughtfully, raising an eyebrow at Sloane.

“I figured you’d prefer the screen on the underside,” Sloane explained, “so we designed it to accommodate an additional protective plate.”

Nemura’s beaming smile was genuine. “You really thought of everything.”

Sloane couldn’t contain her excitement as she nodded. “To sync it, just push a tiny bit of mana into it. It’ll push back a little—that’s just it connecting with your core. You have to willfully allow it to do so.”

Nemura’s face contorted in concentration, her tall, warrior woman frame making the effort look both endearing and comical. After a few moments, her eyes widened in surprise as the screen illuminated and displayed the Reinhart logo before transitioning to the main menu,

She quickly navigated to the Excerpt, her fingers moving a bit hesitantly as she read through the options. When her excerpt came up, Nemura lightly gasped. “It’s incredible,” she murmured, clearly impressed. “It really works.”

Sloane feigned shock, her voice dripping with mock indignation. “Did you really doubt me?”

Nemura met her gaze, her eyes filled with emotion. “Never.”



The inky darkness of the night enveloped the streets as Nemura and Sloane made their way back to the manor on Noble Way. The manor, a two-story structure, stood elegantly with its quaint arch leading to a cobblestone courtyard. At its center, a fountain murmured softly, its gentle splashes echoing the tranquility of the surroundings. The architecture reminded Sloane of the rustic charm of Italy.

*It’s so much more intimate than the estate in Marketbol and closer to what I’m used to.*

Nemura nudged her gently. “You good?”

Sloane nodded, her gaze still fixed on the manor. “Just reminiscing. This place... it feels more like home. It’s similar in size to my house back on Earth.”

Nemura scanned the manor, her eyebrows raised in surprise as she whistled softly. “You lived in a place like this back there?”



Sloane chuckled, the sound light and airy. “Even better, actually. We had electricity, internet, bidets, and showers...”

Nemura smirked, playfully rolling her eyes. “Ah, right. Your fancy indoor waterfalls you’ve told us about.”

With a theatrical gesture, Sloane opened the door, bowing slightly. “After you.”

Nemura snorted, her amusement evident, and stepped inside.

The evening had been a rollercoaster of emotions, but after their candid conversation and exploring of the excerpt reader, the atmosphere had lightened considerably. They’d shared stories, laughed heartily, and indulged in some delightful people-watching all over an embarrassing number of mugs filled with ale. She definitely felt closer to the woman and Sloane felt a warmth in her chest thinking about it.

*Misunderstandings aside, tonight was worth it.*

She was confident that Nemura’s professionalism and loyalty would ensure that their bond remained unshaken. With everything out in the open, Sloane believed they were on solid ground.

The moment they entered the manor, the soft glow from the chandeliers illuminated the foyer, casting a warm, welcoming light. Two sun elf maids with their dark hair arranged in neat braids that were definitely more presentable than Sloane’s hair currently, immediately approached them. Their poised stances and attentive expressions suggested they had been anticipating their return.

“Good evening, milady,” greeted one of the maids, her voice melodic and respectful. She gave a slight curtsy. “Welcome home.”

Sloane nodded in acknowledgment, her gaze drifting momentarily to Nemura, who was quietly conversing with one of the guards.

“Thank you,” Sloane replied, her voice gentle. “Has the evening been peaceful?”

“Indeed, milady,” the maid responded. “Master Stranca is currently in the parlor, and young mistress Mariel has been working in her room since dinner.”

Sloane’s eyebrows raised slightly at the mention of Mariel. “Thank you for the update. I think I’ll check on Mariel first, and then I’ll probably turn in for the night.”

The second maid stepped forward, her posture suggesting readiness to assist. “Would you like any help preparing for the evening, milady?”

Sloane offered a reassuring smile, shaking her head. “No need, but thank you. I can manage. You both should take the evening to rest.”

With a nod of gratitude, Sloane ascended the staircase, her footsteps echoing softly. On the second floor, the rugs muffled her steps as she approached Mariel's room. She paused for a moment, listening for any sounds from within. Hearing none, she rapped gently on the door. When no response came, she cautiously pushed the door open.

The room was bathed in the soft glow of a single lamp, revealing a meticulously made bed. Sloane's eyes scanned the room, finally settling on Mariel. The raithe girl was sprawled across her desk, her head resting on her arms, seemingly lost in thought or perhaps exhaustion. A tender smile tugged at Sloane's lips as she took in the scene.

*She must've had quite the day.*

She walked past a lounging Vesper who barely lifted her head to acknowledge Sloane's presence. Sloane rolled her eyes. *Lazy cat.*

"You don't even need sleep," she hissed quietly at the thing.

A yawn was her response.

Sloane rolled her eyes and continued to Mariel.

The soft glow from the room's lantern illuminated Mariel's workspace, revealing a scattering arrangement of bones. Sloane's eyebrows arched as she took in the scene, clearly the teenager had fallen asleep working on her magic.

*She's been practicing so much.*

Sloane gently placed a hand on Mariel's shoulder, her voice a soft whisper, "Mariel? Come on, time to get some rest."

Mariel stirred, her eyes fluttering open with a hint of confusion. "Huh? S-Sloane?" she mumbled, her voice thick with sleep.

"It's me," Sloane reassured, offering a gentle smile. "Let's get you to bed."

But as Mariel's senses sharpened, she sat up abruptly, her eyes widening. "I tried to wait for you," she admitted, her voice tinged with guilt. "I wanted to show you the surprise."

Sloane smiled. "It's quite alright. You didn't have to wait for me. You can show me in the morning."

"But the surprise!" Mariel looked around and froze. "Uh, where is it?"

Sloane's gaze followed Mariel's frantic search on the desk. "Where is what?"

A soft rustling sound drew Sloane's attention to the vanity on her left. Curiously, she leaned in, only to freeze when two luminescent yellow eyes stared back at her. Suddenly, a skeletal figure hopped into view, revealing itself to be a meticulously crafted bird skeleton, no bigger than a sparrow.

Sloane's heart raced, and she instinctively recoiled. "*Gabb!!*"

Mariel, equally startled by Sloane's reaction, jumped to her feet. "Sloane? What's wrong?"

Sloane's pulse thundered in her ears. *What the fuck?* But as she took a moment to process, she realized the skeleton was precisely what Mariel had been excitedly discussing for weeks.

Mariel's face crumpled as she realized what had startled Sloane, her eyes filling with tears. "I—I thought you'd like it."

Sloane took a steadying breath, her initial shock fading. She approached Mariel, her voice gentle. "Mariel, sweetie, it's okay. Come here. I was just taken by surprise."

The girl didn't move so Sloane stepped forward and pulled her into a hug.

Mariel sniffled, her voice trembling. "So, you're not scared of it?"

"No!" Sloane chuckled softly, shaking her head. "No, not scared. Just... startled. Remember the story about Tiberius?"

"You screamed when you woke up with him on your chest after you made him," Mariel said through her sniffles, her voice muffled through Sloane's embrace.

"Exactly," Sloane affirmed with a grin. "I tend to overreact when I see unexpected things. It's not you or your little bird. It's just me being... well, me. A big scaredy cat."

The dim light of the room cast a gentle glow on the skeletal bird as it hopped around energetically. Sloane's eyes followed its movements, her curiosity piqued. "Can it fly?" she inquired, her voice a mix of wonder and uncertainty.

In response, as if the creature had a mind of its own, it flapped its wings. A mist of black mana seeped from its chest and enveloped its wings. With a few more determined flaps, the skeletal bird took to the air, soaring gracefully. *It's eerie, yet fascinating*, Sloane mused, her eyes tracking its flight. The bird completed a leisurely loop around the room before settling comfortably on Mariel's shoulder.

Mariel, her eyes still red from crying, looked up at her creation and stroked its head gently with evident pride. "It was so challenging! The **[Animate Skeleton]** spell wouldn't let it fly and I thought it was broken. Then I had a thought and found out that I needed to just combine it with my **[Necromancy]**. The concentration it required was insane, and I kept making mistakes. I got so frustrated." She paused, her face lighting up with a hint of mischief. "But then, I discovered a new spell."

Sloane noticed Mariel's gaze shift slightly, a shadow of guilt passing over her face. Following the girl's line of sight, Sloane spotted three bone-like bolts embedded in the wall. They looked sharp, deadly, and oddly beautiful in their own way. Sloane couldn't help but grin. "Those look wicked. What are they?"

Mariel's surprise was evident, but it quickly transformed into a gleeful smile.

With a flourish, she pointed her hand towards the same section of the wall. Three more bone spikes materialized out of thin air, shooting forward with impressive speed and force, embedding themselves next to their predecessors.

Sloane's eyebrows shot up in admiration. "That's really awesome."

Mariel's excitement was palpable as she twirled, her dress swishing around her. "Aren't they amazing? They're called [**Bone Splinters**]. Now, if anyone threatens us, I can defend us too!"

The weight of Mariel's words pressed heavily on Sloane's chest, threatening to pull her into a whirlpool of emotions. Her heart ached, thinking of the burdens the young girl had to bear.

*She's just a child*, Sloane thought, the maternal instincts within her roaring to life. But another voice, colder and more pragmatic, whispered that in this world, with its relentless system, Mariel had to adapt, to grow stronger. To do otherwise would be to doom her to vulnerability.

Sloane took a deep, steadying breath, trying to suppress the protective motherly instincts that threatened to overwhelm her. Mariel was only fourteen, a tender age by any standard. Yet, in this perilous world of magic and monsters, she needed to be equipped to defend herself. She needed to harness her magic, to wield it with precision and responsibility.

*Can I truly guide her through this?* Sloane pondered, her thoughts racing. *Can I strike the right balance between protecting her and preparing her for the challenges ahead?*

She'd need Nemura and Stefan's help.

*If it were Gwyn, would I stifle her growth just to keep her safe? Could I allow her to practice magic this way—if she even has magic—like Mariel?*

*Can I really be what Mariel needs and wants?*

Pushing aside her doubts, Sloane met Mariel's hopeful gaze. "Alright," she began, determination evident in her voice, "It's time we got serious with your magic."

Mariel's eyes sparkled with anticipation, searching Sloane's face for confirmation. "Really? I can help?"

Sloane's heart twinged, but she maintained her resolve. "Yes," she affirmed, glancing at the skeletal bird perched on Mariel's shoulder. "This little friend of yours is just the start. We need to work towards you raising a full-fledged skeleton, one that can truly defend."

Mariel's mouth fell open in astonishment. "Whaa..?"

“Yes. And your [**Bone Splinters**] is only the beginning. Now that I know you can *conjure* bone, we need to see the limits of what you can do. I don’t know if you’re the first necromancer, but I will be building excerpt readers for each of us. When I do I want to track your progress.”

Mariel’s eyes widened as she absorbed every word. Sloane continued, “Each spell you create will give you a significant amount of ‘essentia’ as Aila calls it. Essentia is what fuels our growth. We both believe that being the first to create any specific spell gives more. Our goal is for you to invent as many spells as possible so that you get as many levels... sorry, steps as possible. That’s key.”

Mariel’s excitement bubbled over as she bounced in place. “I can do that! I promise. I’ll strive to be the best...”

“Necromancer,” Sloane supplied.

Mariel’s face lit up. “Yes! The best necromancer the world will ever see!”

*Well, hopefully, this isn’t her supervillain origin story.*

Sloane smiled at her joke but said, “And I’ll be right here to help you every step of the way. Remember, keep it secret until we find out whether or not we’re going to have a bunch of paladins coming after us.”

Mariel’s expression turned serious, her young face taking on a thoughtful look. “Yes. I have thought about that. I will focus on animals!”

“That’s a wise choice,” Sloane nodded, “but don’t rule out the possibility of raising the skeleton of a person. Imagine equipping them with armor and weapons.”

“That... Wow. Yessss!” Mariel’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “A skeleton warrior, standing shoulder to shoulder with Nemura in battle. Oh, Relena. That sounds like the stuff of legends!”

Sloane raised a cautionary finger, “While the idea of commanding an army of undead creatures is probably tempting, I want you to hone your skills on perfecting a single raised entity at a time. Strengthen that one minion to its utmost potential. Understood?”

Mariel saluted playfully. “Got it!” Her gaze darted to the desk scattered with bones, then back to Sloane with a mischievous glint. “I think I’m going to need more bones!”

*I’ll take things I never thought I’d bear in my life for five hundred, Alex.*

“We’ll get them. I’ll have Stefan do it. Seems like something he’d enjoy.”

Mariel let out a snort of laughter, her eyes dancing with amusement. “He’s going to absolutely *loathe* it.”

A sly grin spread across Sloane’s face. “Yeah, I can’t wait to hear him complain. But for now, off to bed with you.”

A pout with eyes wide came in reply as Mariel pleaded, “Just a little longer?”

“Nope, sleep. You can practice in the morning. You were already passed out when I came in.”

Mariel huffed, “Ugh! Alright, mothe—” She caught herself mid-sentence, her eyes widening in horror.

Time seemed to freeze. Sloane's heart skipped a beat, and the weight of the word and all it entailed hung heavily between them.

Mariel's voice was barely above a whisper, laced with regret. “I—I'm sorry.”

Sloane took a deep breath, her voice gentle. “No, no. It's alright. Head to bed. We'll talk in the morning.”

“You're... you're not upset?”

“Why would I be? Rest up, Mar. You need it. Tomorrow, we'll practice a bit, and then I'll work on the readers for you and Stefan. Okay?”

Mariel nodded slowly, her gaze still searching Sloane's face for any sign of displeasure. After a moment, she moved towards her bed, her steps hesitant. Vesper got up and walked out of the room as Sloane approached the lamp. She blew gently into the glass to extinguish its flame and plunged the room into a soft darkness.

She hesitated for a moment, a whirlwind of emotions threatening to overwhelm her. Pushing past her uncertainty, she approached Mariel's bed, gently tucking the blankets around the girl. “Good night, Mar.”

From the shadows, a soft voice responded, “Good night... Sloane.”

Sloane's gaze shifted, her fingers instinctively reaching out to touch Mariel. The gentle touch brushed against Mariel's arm, moving upwards to play with the loose strands of her black hair. As she tenderly tucked them behind the girl's ear, a warm smile graced her lips.

Suddenly, a vivid memory washed over her.

*“Notte, mamma,” Gwyn's voice, soft and filled with the weight of sleep, echoed in her mind.*

*In the memory, Sloane bent down, her fingers delicately brushing Gwyn's hair, revealing her peaceful face. She pressed a gentle kiss on her daughter's forehead, whispering, “Sogni d'oro, amore.”*

*Sweet dreams, my love.*

Snapped back to the present, Sloane's hand hesitated mid-air, centimeters from Mariel's face. She withdrew, opting to give Mariel's arm a comforting squeeze instead.

Sloane stepped out of the room, gently closing the door behind her. With a heavy sigh, she leaned against it. She rested her head against the cool wood of the door, her heart aching with

uncertainty. *Am I ready for this?* she wondered. The weight of responsibility and the unexpected bond forming between them was daunting.

*Am I betraying Gwyn by caring for this girl who so clearly needs someone? When we reach Calling, can I truly let her go? Is it even my place to intervene in her life this way?*

The weight of the evening pressed heavily on Sloane's shoulders as she trudged towards her room. Exhaustion tugged at her, both mentally and physically, and all she yearned for was the solace of her bed. She swiped at the moisture on her cheeks, a mix of sweat and tears she hadn't known had fallen, her steps heavy with the weight of her thoughts. *I just need a moment to myself*, she thought, hoping for a brief respite from the day's emotional rollercoaster.

But as she neared her door, a familiar voice pierced the quiet hallway, causing her to halt in her tracks. She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath to steady herself, her fingers curling into tight fists at her sides.

"Sloane?"

She recognized that voice. It was Stefan. *Not now*, she internally groaned.

Without turning, she responded, her voice tinged with weariness, "What's up, Stefan?"

She finally pivoted to face him, noting the concern evident in his crimson eyes as they studied her in the dim corridor light. There was a hesitancy in his stance as if he was debating the wisdom of approaching her at this moment.

"Do you have a moment to talk?" he asked, his voice soft, almost hesitant.

Sloane exhaled slowly, her shoulders sagging slightly. She wasn't in the mood for another conversation, but she couldn't ignore the genuine concern in his voice.

"Yeah," she replied, her voice more gentle now, "What's on your mind?"

"Maybe we should go somewhere private so we can sit?"

Sloane nodded slowly. "Alright. Lead the way."

*I really need some sleep.*

She followed him anyway, hoping whatever it was wouldn't send her into an emotional spiral. But she'd already had two emotional chats with those close to her today, what was one more?

Stefan gestured down the hallway, towards the parlor. "Let's talk somewhere more comfortable," he suggested.

Sloane hesitated for a moment, then nodded. The two of them walked side by side, the silence between them thick with unspoken words. The soft patter of their footsteps on the wooden floor was the only sound accompanying them.

Upon reaching the parlor, Stefan moved towards a polished wooden cabinet, opening it to reveal an array of bottles. The soft glow from the oil lamps in the room bathed the space in a gentle light, casting elongated shadows on the walls. “Drink?” he offered, holding up a decanter filled with a rich, golden liquid.

Sloane shook her head, her hand instinctively going to her temple as if to ward off a headache. “I had enough tonight with Nemura,” she admitted.

Stefan raised an eyebrow, a smirk playing on his lips. “Ah, one of those nights, huh?” Without waiting for a response, he shrugged and poured himself a generous amount, the liquid shimmering as it cascaded into the glass. Taking a sip, he settled into one of the plush chairs. The weight of the day seemed to hang in the air, but for now, they had each other’s company to navigate through it.

She settled into the seat opposite her chief of staff and leaned her head back. The weight of the day pressed down on her, and she let out a deep, weary exhale, her shoulders sagging.

“Busy day?” he asked with a hint of amusement in his voice.

She shook her head, the motion causing her hair to brush softly against the backrest. “Not particularly. Just... emotionally taxing. A whirlwind of feelings.”

He chuckled, though it lacked genuine mirth. “Emotions. Not my strong suit, I admit. But I’m here if you need to talk.”

She waved a dismissive hand, not meeting his gaze. “I appreciate it. Right now, I just need sleep.”

Stefan took a moment, sipping his drink before speaking. “This will be brief. The knights are arriving tomorrow afternoon for the interviews. Are you prepared?”

“Of course,” she replied, her voice firm. “I just need some sleep. Was that all you wanted to talk about?”

He hesitated, his fingers drumming on the glass. “Not entirely. It’s about Mariel.”

A pang of concern shot through her, and she closed her eyes momentarily. “What now?”

“The paladin. He’s requested a meeting with you. Specifically, he mentioned Mariel.”

Her eyes snapped open, immediately darting to the raithe blade resting nearby. “When did he approach you?”

“Earlier today. You were preoccupied, so I told him he’d need to schedule a proper meeting. He wasn’t thrilled, but he agreed.”

She sighed, rubbing her temples. “Alright. When?”

“Tomorrow, after the interviews.”



## Oxylus

“Fuck. Any idea what it's about? Should I be prepared for...”

He shook his head. “I don't... think so. He's coming alone, so that makes me think this is preliminary; whatever it is.”

She nodded, her mind already racing with plans. “I'll be at the center in the morning. If I'm not back by lunch, send someone.”

Stefan gave a curt nod. “Understood. Now, get some rest. And Sloane?”

She paused, her hand on the armrest, ready to push herself up. “Yes?”

He met her gaze, his eyes sincere. “Whatever transpired today, with Nemura, Mariel, or anyone else... Don't overthink it. Trust your instincts. They've rarely led you astray.”

She offered a small, appreciative smile. “Thanks, Stefan.”

Sloane let out a long weary exhale as she left the parlor and made her way to her room.

The weight of the day, the emotional rollercoaster, and the looming decisions had drained her. As she finally lay down to sleep, the plush feather pillows surrounded her and cradled her head snugly like a fortress of fluff. The gentle rustling of the curtains in the night breeze was the last thing she registered. The world around her faded, and the comforting embrace of sleep claimed her, offering a brief respite from the challenges that awaited her.