

The Sovereign Cities

The caravan had traveled slowly, making sure to settle for each night in defensible locations in case of attacks—even if that meant stopping earlier. In the end, it hadn't been necessary, yet Sloane was still glad they'd done it. She wasn't quite sure what it was, but the Valeni had really caused her to rethink many things. How dangerous is mana to us? What other changes are we undergoing? *Those cat eyes were beautiful.*

When the city of Marketbol was in sight, what stood out to her was how *amazing* it looked. Here was a city in stark contrast to the other one she had seen; its wealth was on display from the moment you could see it. The walls were almost pearl white with red painted accents and red roofs on the towers and a covered section near the gate. In fact, it was as if the entire city had required every construction to maintain the same aesthetic. Roofs of red and gold trim peeked above the wall.

A strangely out-of-place butte not far inside the wall hosted the most fantasy-esque building she'd seen yet. On top of the grassy, tree-covered butte was a massive structure that sat across the entirety of the feature's peak. There was even an overhanging covered terrace that was about a third as wide as the structure. The nested roofs and the angular overhangs and sharp peaks reminded her of old architecture in the Nordic countries.

Sitting on a large hill further back from where the butte sat could only be the city's palace.

"Hey, Stefan. What are those buildings?" Sloane asked the rai the sitting next to her on the wagon's driving bench.

He shifted so he could squint and look in the distance, shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand. "Ahh, that building there by itself on Market Rise is the Banking Guild's headquarters. The bigger palatial structure on Bol Hill is the City's Hall of Governance."

"Really? That's where they get the name? Wow." she said drolly

Stefan chuckled. "Yes, there have been attempts to rename it in the past. Apparently, the people that live there refuse out of principle at this point."

Sloane nodded along as he spoke. She could understand it. It's their home, and some people love their cities deeply, faults and all. Looking at the structure on the cliff, she imagined how difficult it would be to go up any stairs to it. "I can imagine getting up to the headquarters is a pain..."

Stefan scoffed. "Scholars and workers hired and brought from the Eastern Reaches of the continent devised an ingenious method of lifts. Oh, look. You can see it now," he said and pointed toward the structure.

Sloane squinted and her eyes widened as she saw a small—or what seemed small from their distance—platform being lowered from the overhanging terrace. *So that's what it is used for.*

"Huh. An elevator."

Stefan glanced at her but did not reply.

"It sure is beautiful. Looks expensive to live in though. Everything is so... planned."

"It is that. Elodie would know more, though. If she says we have enough to purchase a location for a center, we do."

She and Elodie had come up with a plan to purchase a building as close to the city's Scholar's Quarter as possible. It seemed that the city had a fairly important School that was specialized and focused on merchants, economics, and trade skills. Precisely the types of people and experts she would want to hire for the Reinhart Center.

Adaega and her had spoken more on the subject, and the more they spoke, the more Sloane was convinced her fellow human was the woman for the job. Adaega had ideas about the project as a whole and had spent many nights speaking about them with her, Elodie, and Ernard. The Reinhart Center, Marketbol, would focus on materials research and their interactions and use with mana. In her journey to Avira, Adaega had convinced her to be on the lookout for other opportunities to start another center. One dedicated to magic would be ideal. Setting these centers up would provide her House with a steady source of income, influence, and networking in the region. Elodie had agreed wholeheartedly, and she was sure that the Romaris family would gladly join in any venture with a profit potential.

Speaking of profit, Sloane sighed. Elodie and she had finished the Rune Card terminal with the help of her smith—Koren—and she was ready to test it as soon as they reached the city. Elodie had explained the importance of setting everything up properly, and an especially important thing they needed was at the suggestion of her uncle. They needed a lawyer.

She shrugged. “I trust her. The first thing we need to do is locate this Baker person, and then find the House one of these esquires.”

Stefan gave her a side-eye. “Can we settle into an inn, first? A bath would be nice.”

She paused. They had been on the road for two months, with only intermittent stops. The only cleaning they’d been able to do was with stream water that was *freezing*. The group was tired and worn out from the travels. Relaxing for the rest of the day would be a smart decision. “That’s... probably a good idea,” she agreed.

The raithe smirked and when Stefan refocused on the road ahead of them, Sloane quickly and subtly sniffed her armpit—under the guise of looking out and around the wagon, wincing and trying to not jerk her head back the moment she took a whiff.

He was talking about a bath for himself... right?

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Sloane walked down the road, Nemura to her right and Deryk to her left, as they made their way to Drury Lane. She felt much better after taking a bath. It wasn’t as long or relaxing as she may have wanted but at least she felt... *clean*. It was definitely the right choice. *Not that I’ll admit it to Stefan.*

She was about to move around a group of people standing and talking, but one of the elves glanced at her and almost shoved the others out of the way. Sloane raised a brow at the action but then understood after a glance at her two escorts. She was sure they were an imposing sight, Sloane in her well-made clothing with a knight and guard who looked like they could *and would* break anyone in two. In fact, she shouldn’t have been surprised in the least that a group

of people standing on the sidewalk had moved. With a thought, she noted that everyone else that caught sight of her had subtly moved out of her way as well.

The city was beautiful and immaculate. Everywhere she looked, she saw people sitting and enjoying the various gardens, parks, and fountains. Statues of exquisite make adorned the public spaces with people sitting on steps or benches relaxing. People moved in and out of shops shopping and enjoying the day, even with the afternoon chill. They even had people dedicated to cleaning the streets and alleys from all of the refuse that came with a city such as this with as few modern amenities. It was so refreshing to see it all. The safety, the prosperity... She wanted this for when she found her daughter.

She could see her breath as she walked, but the dryness of the day kept any chance of snow away. The seasons were shifting to winter, and everyone was bundled up for warmth, but that didn't keep the children indoors. Children ran around and played various games, with one group kicking what looked like a leather ball around. An elf boy kicked it away from a girl and she smiled as the telv girl ran harder to catch up to him. Other boys and girls jumped up and down, calling out for him to pass it to them. *I bet Gwyn would love to play soccer.*

She considered Adaega and the woman's prior request. *This will be a good home for her.*

Sloane smiled as she noticed a group of people lounging in a park they were passing. An older telv couple was sitting on a blanket, a little basket filled with what looked like lunch and snacks. A wine bottle sat between the two and the man was placing grapes and cheeses onto a plate while the woman read a book. The woman said something as she turned a page and the man chuckled. She couldn't help but giggle as she watched him pluck a grape from his plate followed by reaching over and placing one of the grapes into her open mouth. It was so... cute.

Deryk nudged her shoulder and gestured to one of the streets across from where they stood. She nodded and waited for several carriages to pass before crossing the road. The street was lively and seemed to feature many produce stores, a butcher, and many bakeries of all types. One seemed to focus on bread, while another had little pastries.

She saw a sign and smiled. *This couldn't be more obvious.* Ahead and to the right was a sign that said simply... Baking Company. *Zero effort guys. Come on...* She heard Nemura huff a laugh as they got closer. They entered the bare bakery and she looked around. The first thing she noticed was the lack of any decorations. A counter sat in front of them with a large stone oven in the corner. There was a door to another room, and a raithe sat in front of it on a stool leaning on

the counter. To the left on a set of shelves that took up the entire wall was an assortment of bread of numerous types. Half of them looked nearly burnt.

The worker was a thin raithe with vibrant teal skin. His eyes were the color of storm clouds and were shaded by his shoulder-length purple hair. He wore simple clothing and seemed bored as all get out. The man looked up as the three of them walked in. His surprise at having customers was evident because his mouth kind of just dropped open without saying anything.

Sloane waved and stepped up to the counter. "Good afternoon! Are you the *Baker*?"

Deryk groaned behind her.

The raithe shook his head. "No, no milady. I am not. May I assist you?"

Sloane shook her head sadly. "I do not believe so. I wished to go over a large order with the baker. I want to discuss if it is possible."

The guy nodded along as she spoke. "A-a large order? How large, milady?"

She nearly froze. *I haven't gotten that far yet!* "Uhh... Let's see... Nemura? How large of an order would you say we require?" She stepped to the side to look at the woman.

Nemura narrowed her eyes. "We require an order to cover at least one hundred. Possibly more."

The telv gasped. "I understand! Let me get the baker right away." He started to move to the back door, but then froze and turned. "When did you need this all done?"

Sloane smiled and answered, "As soon as possible. This a *very* valuable order."

His eyes widened. "Understood! Thank you, milady!"

The man ran into the back, Nemura and Deryk both gave her a look. She shrugged. "What? Clearly, he took it at face value."

Nemura shook her head. "You are about as subtle as a rockslide."

Sloane sniffed. "Thank you!"

She turned her head as the raithe man returned, followed by a moon elf. That man instantly appraised the three of them. He narrowed his twilight blue eyes and glanced at his worker. "Go clean up the back. I have this."

The raithe's eyes darted back and forth between Sloane and his boss but then he hung his head. "Alright, boss."

After the raithe left the elf crossed his arms. "You're not here to buy bread."

Sloane raised a brow. "Why not? Your bread looks delicious."

The man scoffed. "No one comes here to buy the bread. It's shit. All of that is made by my apprentice, and I don't have the heart to tell him he'll never make it as a baker. If they want the good stuff, they know how to order it. Now, what do you really want?"

"Can you make... *muffins*?"

He scowled. "*What?*"

He seemed to be adjusting his sleeves, and she guessed he wouldn't appreciate her jokes any longer. The way Nemura and Deryk shifted their stances confirmed it.

"Nevermind. You are the *Baker*?" she asked, ensuring to emphasize the name.

His eyes narrowed. He hesitated slightly but then gestured around. "That is why you are here. What is it to you?" He shifted his arms.

"I was told to tell you, 'Vlaredia moves for the Malduhr Pass.' But that no longer matters."

The man froze.

"Who told you that?"

"We recently had business with the Academy in Thirddhyll."

He brought one hand up to his chin in thought. "You have my attention." He turned and yelled into the back, "*Oi! You're done for the day. Head home. Now.*"

The rai the yelled back and came to the front to gather his things. Without a word, he left them alone but not without constantly throwing curious glances their way. The elf walked to the front door, flipped a small sign in the window, and latched the door shut. When he turned around, it was almost as if he had turned into another person.

His stance was different, his posture, the way his muscles relaxed all seemed different. It was a bit disconcerting. “Who are you, and why does that message no longer matter?”

Sloane took a deep breath. “I am Baroness Sloane Reinhart. I worked with a man named Giallo on a... project. Can you verify your affiliation with... the Academy?”

The man nodded. He walked to the counter and reached underneath, bringing out a... very familiar hat, but of a different color.

“Does the name Giallo have a special meaning to you?” he asked.

She nodded. “It means ‘yellow’ in a language I know.”

“I am Cerulean. His hat would have been like this, but yellow. I can give no other confirmation that you would understand. However, if that is not enough, I suggest only giving me easily verifiable information. Which was the intent of the message you gave. No secrets.”

She nodded. That made sense. Sloane wasn’t a spy, and as Nemura had said, she didn’t quite have the skillset for it. “Thirdghyll has fallen. Monsters attacked it. Goosebourne has fallen. Vlaredia has taken control of it.” The man’s eyes widened and opened his mouth to speak, but she held up a hand. “Vlaredia is just north of the Agenval Forest. We wiped out a watch tower that was set up, but they are definitely moving south with a large army.”

He paused, waiting for her to continue, and when she didn’t he spoke. “The monsters from Valesbeck made it to the city? What of the people?”

Sloane scowled. While she wasn’t sure if the man knew of the plan, she was still bitter about it. She was just happy she was able to facilitate the evacuation of the amount she had. She gestured to Nemura.

“I am Nemura, formerly a Senior Guardswoman of the Thirdghyll Guard. I was released from my service to join Lady Reinhart’s House and assist to spread the message. There were many survivors from the Guilds as well as most of the Guard Garrison of East Fort including

their families. The fort was able to hold out for several days, but then they had to retreat to Vilstaf. We saw no survivors from the nobility. We are not aware of what happened to the Count. We have reason to believe he was ambushed as he attempted to escape a battle in which his personal guard was decimated by monsters.”

Cerulean nodded. “And the army? You suspect it is coming here?”

“I am Ser Deryk of Blightwych. The Vlaredians made no indications of moving toward Westaren, their forces were clearly moving to secure south and seem to be setting up Goosebourne as a secure point from which to launch attacks into this region of the Cities.”

The elf sighed. “That... is not good news. Lady Reinhart, do you have any pressing business to attend to?”

“I have some business, yes.”

“I would like to request that you join me in meeting with the city’s leadership, and include any of your retainers who could give pertinent information. Marketbol sent its army East. They should be almost to Laudenwych by now.”

Deryk tilted his head. “Laudenwych? That’s over one hundred and fifty kilometers from here.”

Cerulean nodded. “Yes. They’re heading to the front. Every City in the region has sent its armies. Valecan, Laudenwych, Wardenshirst, and Marketbol. There are fears that the Vlaredians will take the border City of Constanden before they can be reinforced. The closest City, Valecan sent its armies to attempt and relieve the sieged army. Laudenwych sent its armies to reinforce the Valecani army. The remaining armies are being sent north to reinforce Sacksburn to hold the plains west of the Farum mountains. However, if the Vlaredians made it through the pass, they will have attacked Sacksburn and possibly even taken it already.”

She felt a bit overwhelmed by all of the location names. Sloane would definitely need to get someone to show her a map back at the inn. She knew the region very broadly. North of them was the Agenval Forest, but East was a lake just below the southern edge of a long mountain range. The pass that the army had gone through was the only way through the mountains without going all the way south and around. East of the mountain range was a decently large

plains area that ended at another, smaller, mountain range where Reanny and her brother were from. Beyond that was a valley, where the city that was fighting sat closest to the Empire.

She knew there was a large town with a massive fort in a narrow opening between the mountains east of them that had another Val Forest to the east of *that*. *Shit man, so much stuff is east. Absolutely need a map.*

She sighed. “So, basically, you have an army on the way here, and you have no army to defend yourself with?” Sloane asked.

The man nodded. “It is the Sovereigns that do not, but you are correct. We need to meet with the leadership and pass this information on. There may be time for them to get word to the nearby Cities. Then all we can do is hope an army can make it here in time.”

Deryk looked at Sloane. “We should get Ser Gisele and Ser Ismeld.”

Sloane nodded. “Agreed.” *I certainly do not want to explain this alone.*

She turned back to the moon elf. “Okay, Cerulean. We’ll go with you. I have a vested interest in this city remaining safe. Let’s see what we can do.”

The man let out a hesitant chuckle. “That is... if they listen to us. I *am* a spy after all.”

“Oh... Yeah. There is that.”

He smiled. “Don’t worry. They won’t throw us into the dungeon or anything... I hope.”

She looked around at the bakery. *I have a feeling they already know he’s a spy.*