
A True Calling

Rosale's contributions to the manatech revolution and the third age cannot be understated. Despite being overtaken in developments within a decade, the nation still maintained its position as a key player in the game that gave them outsized influence throughout the first century.

While many will claim it was the early House Reinhart's influence and interest in the nation which enabled such lasting growth, that belief ignores the fact that of the five individuals most attributed with the start of the revolution, three were natives of Rosale.

While Sloane Reinhart is rightfully seen as the mother of innovation, her 'siblings' in this area were certainly giants of industry in their own right.

Mana and Industry: The Early Contemporary Era. 522 SA

“Get back in line, damn it!” Nemura called out. Her eyes were fixed on the front lines, where the struggle against the monstrous horde coming from the village was most fierce.

Sloane, however, momentarily turned her attention away from the shield wall. Beside her, a mage was visibly struggling, beads of sweat streaming down her face despite her icy repertoire of spells. “We need another **[Ice Wall]** on the right flank, now!” Sloane ordered, her voice sharp and urgent. The mage nodded, gathering her strength to cast the defensive spell.

With the wall of glittering blue now reformed, their funnel was restored, pushing the monsters toward the center where the paladins were. Sloane's gaze shifted to one of the healers, who was standing slightly apart from the fray. “Get to the front, left side,” she commanded. “Those damned spiders might break through, and we'll need you there to handle any injuries.” The healer didn't hesitate, rushing off to position himself where he was most needed.

The man ran off without question.

Why, why did it have to be spiders? I'm going to have nightmares and the fucking heebies for weeks.

Her musings were interrupted by Stefan's urgent call. “Sloane! Mortar, center right! We've got a behemoth incoming!” His voice was strained, underscored by the sounds of battle that surrounded them.

As Sloane looked towards the village, she saw it—a monstrous spider, as large as a fucking elephant. Well, a small one, but it was horrible. Its multiple eyes were gleaming with a malevolent intelligence that seemed to lock onto hers. Its massive legs scuttled across the ground, crawling around the buildings as if they were simply another part of its nest, each step a promise of devastation. Sloane

felt a surge of revulsion mixed with determination. That abomination needed to be obliterated. It was nasty. It deserved to die a million deaths. Fire. All the magic in the world, and she had no fucking fire.

Then, from behind her, came Mariel's voice, surprisingly chipper amidst the horror. "Get it, Mom! Smoosh that big lame spider!" Like a little skeletal devil on her shoulder.

She was way too excited.

That kid isn't afraid of things people should be afraid of. She's my little lovecraftian fighter. You get em, Mar.

Sloane holstered her caster and focused as she drew on her traits that made runic casting so much easier. Channeling mana through her core with practiced ease, she quickly sketched the intricate rune in the air for the spell. As the crackling rune of destructive potential finished, it flared and released the mass of pure energy. She watched as the [**Arcane Mortar**] arced gracefully through the sky before slamming into the monstrous spider.

But didn't kill it.

Fuck.

The hit clearly hurt it as the creature screeched out. It was even missing a leg, but it was still coming. And this time it was focused solely on her and seemed angry as fuck.

Shit, shit, shit.

Her hands blurred into motion as she moved to fire a second time. She shoved as much mana as she could into the spell, just enough so that the rune didn't explode in her face, and let it release.

The second [**Arcane Mortar**] fired. Sloane's vision blurred slightly, but then the hit of her spell snapped her out of her funk, even if she was still breathing heavily.

The second impact was monumental. The explosion tore through the creature, sending chunks of its grotesque body flying in all directions, coating the nearby buildings in a gruesome rain of spider parts. Despite the horror of it all, Sloane couldn't deny the satisfaction that surged through her as she watched the beast's demise.

Sloane had to admit... Nuking the thing with the might of the arcane felt *fucking great*.

She glanced over to see the Church's ice mage looking at her with no small bit of awe and a slight blush.

Yeah, bitch. Eat it up. I'm amazing.

"That's the last one, *forward!*" Nemura's voice rang out once more, rallying the guardsmen. With renewed vigor, the group surged forward. Even the ice mage at her side shouted as the woman ran

forward to add her magic to the mix. Vesper's beams were visible in the distance, and she caught sight of Tiberius circling above.

The battle wound down, the last of the creatures dispatched, leaving them victorious but weary. Sloane remained vigilant, her eyes scanning the perimeter of the village. She couldn't shake the feeling that something might yet emerge from the shadows. Or maybe it was because of the damned spiders.

Mariel appeared beside her, a reassuring presence in the aftermath of the chaos. Grasping Sloane's hand, her daughter's voice was filled with pride. "Great job, Mom. You showed those spiders who's boss."

Sloane couldn't suppress a shiver. "Honestly, I'd rather camp out here than set foot in that village." The thought of lurking spiders sent a chill down her spine.

Undeterred, Mariel leaned in conspiratorially. "Don't worry, I've got your back. I've picked up a few sneaky tricks myself. I'll get any spider that gets close to you," she said with a mischievous glint in her eye.

Sloane fixed her daughter with a stern gaze. "Mariel, no unnecessary risks, okay? Stay close. I do not want you getting caught. Just stay with me. Please, Mar. That's more trouble than it's worth. We can have... Vesper burn every last one of them. Yes. Burn them to a crisp."

She shivered again.

Mariel's response was a dramatic groan as she flung her head backward. "Okay, okay, I get it. No spider hunting."

Just then, Sloane felt a tickle at the back of her neck, and she let out an involuntary screech, her heart racing.

The source of her fright was quickly revealed as Nemura's laughter echoed in the air. Sloane spun around, her hand connecting with the larger woman's chest in a reflexive slap. "Damn it! That was not funny, Nem!"

Nemura's chuckle was unrepentant. "You're brave enough to face down all sorts of monsters, but spiders are what you're scared of, huh?"

Sloane's frustration was palpable. "But those were *monster* spiders. Huge, disgusting things!"

"And you killed two of them," Nemura pointed out, still amused.

Exasperated, Sloane threw her hands up and pushed past the teasing, jerk warrior. But then she paused and turned back to the woman. "Any casualties?" she asked quietly.

Nemura nodded. "A few, but no deaths. The healer you sent to the left saved two that would have. Good thinking."

Sloane gave her friend a curt nod before turning and walking toward the nightmare infested village.

Getting through this village only took a few weeks. Having the extra guards and casters seems to have come in handy.

Only a bit further.



It took another four days after finally clearing the village for Tiberius to see the first signs of the army. Even on a tiny screen they were a beautiful fucking sight to Sloane. She'd be lying if she said men and women in uniform didn't do anything for her, but... after nearly an entire season fighting monsters almost daily, those lines of weary fighters were a sight for sore eyes.

The wagon trundled along, its wheels crunching over the uneven road. She glanced at Nemura, who sat beside her on the bench as Sloane drove the wagon for once. "Finally," she exhaled, her voice tinged with relief.

Nemura stretched. "Absolutely. First things first, we find an inn. Then, it's straight to the baths for us."

Sloane chuckled. "I would normally have a comment about that, but nope. None. I'm with you. Smelly kid in the back needs something done for her hair, too. Probably a trim as well. Actually, I think I need one, too."

Nemura raised an eyebrow, a playful tone in her voice. "Careful, you start talking haircuts, and next thing you know, Mariel will be persuading you to get those piercings she's been on about."

Sloane grinned. "You know what? Fuck it. Let's do it. Celebratory piercings. Are you in, Nemmy? Maybe you could go for something unexpected, like a belly button piercing."

Nemura rolled her eyes. "Don't be weird."

"What!? It'll be cute! Come on, think about it. Big, intimidating warrior like you, then surprise, a cute little butterfly charm on your belly button!"

The telv feigned annoyance. "I hate you."

Sloane's laughter rang out again, the sound mingling with the wagon's rhythmic creaking. She glanced back at Mariel, who was fast asleep, and her smile softened. Yes, they would make a day of it—haircuts, piercings, a bit of mother-daughter bonding.

"How far is Calling from this point?"

Oxylus

“About fifty kilometers,” Nell said from her place in the back of the wagon. She was resting after taking an awkward hit while fighting the previous day. Stefan was riding her horse. “We’ll hit the town of Hanton, first. Spend a night there, we’ll hit the public baths, then press on. We’ll be leaving the High Priestess here soon, as well. I told her we are no longer able to move slowly since it will be Autumn by the time we arrive in Calling. If we’re going to make it, we have to get everything done then onto a ship quickly.”

Sloane turned to Nell with a playful smirk. “Why Nell, did you just invite yourself to the baths with us?”

The paladin rolled her eyes, a hint of amusement in her voice. “All of us women are going. It’s a safety in numbers situation. The town will be swarming with soldiers. Normally, I’d trust them, but these are tough times. Plus, you’re not exactly my type, Sloane.”

Sloane feigned shock, while Nemura’s laughter filled the air.

“Fair enough, Churchie. Maybe you can help us find some decent hair products when we get there.”

“Just wait until we get to Calling for all of the other stuff. It’s known for the high quality personal care products they sell. The nobles there go crazy over it.”

Sloane couldn’t wait. Her head was getting crazy. It was time to tame this mane.



Getting through the line of military was surprisingly easy when you let the paladin and high priestess do the talking. Some of the higher ups even remembered the high priestess from when she had tried to push through. The looks on their faces made Sloane believe that they weren’t surprised at her return or losses.

They *were* a bit surprised when Nell had explained the fortified camps and how they had cleared completely through the pass. The army had sent an entire battalion into the pass to take advantage of that news.

The village, nestled just behind the large army camp they passed through, thrummed with the low hum of activity. Soldiers and support staff moved with purpose, creating a backdrop of organized chaos. In the midst of it all, Sloane, Nell, and Nemura stood in an uneasy semi-circle, facing High Priestess Othiwen in the village square.

Manabound - Resilience

The High Priestess's gaze lingered on Sloane, a mixture of emotions in her eyes. "Miss Rossi, our time together has been... enlightening," she began, her voice controlled. "I wish you safe travels to Calling."

Sloane nodded, a polite smile gracing her lips. "Thank you, High Priestess. Your company has been invaluable. I also hope your return to Calling is smooth."

Othiwen's gaze then shifted to Nell, her expression tightening. "Evocati Nell, I must express my concern once more about the young girl, Mariel. The dangers she's been exposed to..."

Nell cut her off with a dismissive wave. "High Priestess, the girl is under our care, and we've ensured her safety at every turn. It's also impolite to speak of her without her guardian here. Nevertheless, she's more capable than you give her credit for."

The High Priestess's lips thinned, but she said nothing more on the matter. With a curt nod, she turned and walked away, her robes swishing behind her.

Thank god. That was way too fucking close for comfort.

Now Mariel could be safer without that potential mess of epic proportions hanging over their heads. Hopefully the woman would return to her whole mission of finding Sloane in Nornport. That would give them enough time to get the hell out of Rosale before the jig was up.

That was headaches and threats of magical violence that Sloane didn't need.

As the tension in the air eased, the trio made their way towards the waiting wagon. Stefan sat at the reins. Mariel's face was alight with anticipation as she bounced on the bench beside him. The other paladins were standing in a small group with their horses. One held onto Nell's that Nemura would be riding.

In the back, Vesper lay in faux repose, seemingly unfazed by the surrounding commotion.

Darn lazy cat. One of these days I'm going to make you run alongside the wagon.

Stefan glanced at them as they approached. "Managed to gather some supplies, not much, but it'll give us a snack on the way to Hanton."

Sloane stepped up into the wagon with Nell right behind her, her gaze sweeping over the small group that had become her family. "Good work. Let's head out then." She settled in, her eyes on the road ahead.

"Ready, Mom?" Mariel asked excitedly. "We're finally back to civilization."

"I'm ready. I have a surprise for you when we get to Calling."

"Really? What is it?"

Sloane laughed. "It wouldn't be a surprise if I told you!"

Oxylus

“You didn’t have to tell me you had a surprise this soon! Now I’m going to go crazy until we get there.”

The wagon creaked into motion, the village square receding into the distance. Ahead lay Hanton, a waypoint on their journey, promising a brief respite from the rigors of the road.

Sloane leaned back and closed her eyes. “Wake me up when we get to town.”

“Get some sleep, Mom.”

“I love you, you cute little Acolyte of Death, you.”

Mariel groaned. She heard Stefan tease her daughter, but she just let it wash over her. She lay there, a content smile on her face, letting the sounds of her companions and movement of the wagon lull her into sleep.

It was nice to feel safe again.



The group quickly settled into an inn in Hanton for the night and it didn’t take long at all for the men and women to separate. Sloane didn’t care where the men went because she found herself staring at a nice, large bath.

She stepped forward and slowly lowered herself into the steaming bath, a sigh of utter delight escaping her lips as the warm embrace of the water enveloped her. Nell and the other female paladin, their expressions a mixture of relaxation and awe, were already nestled comfortably in the bath, their conversations a soft murmur in the steam-filled room. Nemura stepped in after Sloane, her movements as fluid as the water that rippled around her.

Sloane’s gaze inadvertently drifted downward, catching a glimpse of—she quickly averted her eyes, her cheeks flushing a deeper shade.

This damn water is really hot.

Their serene moment was punctuated by Mariel’s sharp entry. The young woman, bearing her sharp incisors like a cat, let out a small hiss with a mixture of surprise and discomfort as she dipped into the bath a bit too quickly. “That’s hot!” she exclaimed, her voice echoing slightly off the tiled walls.

Sloane, seated comfortably with the warm water caressing her skin, chuckled softly at her daughter’s reaction. “Well, it is steaming,” she remarked with a playful tone, watching as Mariel finally settled next to her, the initial shock of the heat subsiding.

“How did they manage to get the water this hot?” Nell inquired, her voice a blend of curiosity and contentment as she leaned back, allowing the heat to soothe her muscles. The dim light of the room reflected off the water, casting a serene glow on the sun elf’s face. “Not that I’m complaining. This is delightful.”

“Oh!” Mariel interjected enthusiastically, her eyes brightening with knowledge. “I know this. One of the maids in the inn possesses magic. She can heat up water!” Her voice held a note of admiration, as if the very idea of such a skill fascinated her. “I can’t do anything with water,” she murmured.

Sloane chuckled and nudged her gently, causing some of the water to ripple around her daughter, eliciting another hiss of surprise. “Don’t worry about water. You have much cooler magic.”

Her daughter blushed and tried to hide her smile. “T-Thanks, Mom.”

As the evening wore on, Sloane and her companions lounged in the soothing embrace of the bath, the tension of their recent struggles and outdoor living dissipating in the steamy air. Nell’s relaxed posture was a stark contrast to her usual battle-ready demeanor, and the gentle ripples of the water reflected the softened expressions on their faces.

“What do you think the others are up to tonight?” the other paladin woman asked.

Nemura, with a knowing smile, replied, “Oh, they’re all out drinking. Stefan included. A bit of unwinding, I suppose.”

Nell, who had been half-closing her eyes in relaxation, opened them with a sigh. “Yes, the men haven’t really had a chance to let loose in a while. It’ll be good for them to grab a few drinks and relax with friends. But if they cause any damage...” she trailed off, leaving the threat unspoken.

Her companion snorted. “They don’t have either of us there to keep them out of trouble. You know they’re going to go crazy with the freedom.”

Sloane chuckled lightly. “I’m sure they’ll be fine. They know better than to cross you, Nell. Actually, what types of things do you paladins do for fun?”

Nell shrugged. “Normal things? We may be a part of the Church, but we’re just normal people like any other.”

The portal puker chuckled. “Yeah, we know how to have a good time, but we also know when it’s time to be professional.”

“So, you guys all spend a lot of time together, do everything together... do you ever... you know?”

The two women shared a look and started laughing. Nell shoved a thumb toward the other woman. “We try not to, but she’s done a tumble with a few of the guys before a particularly tense mission.”

Nemura laughed. “It was like that in our squads too. Got to ease the nerves somehow. That, drinking, and baths. Always good before anything tense. What about you, Nell?”

The other woman interjected, “Nell here has a very particular type, and none of us on the squad are *that*. I think tall, muscular woman like—”

Nell’s eyes widened and she splashed her fellow paladin, causing everyone to laugh.

As the others devolved into a talk about types and more... detailed subjects, Sloane glanced at her daughter whose grey skin was turning a cute shade of purple. She leaned over and whispered in Mar’s ear, “You alright? Too much?”

“N-No, you all really talk just about this stuff freely? I didn’t think women talked like this,” Mariel whispered.

Sloane snorted. “This is normal, sweetheart, but if you’re uncomfortable...”

“N-No! It’s fine. I know all about... that stuff.”

“So, we don’t need to have any—”

Her daughter’s cheeks blushed even more. “No! Nope. Nuh uh. I’m good.”

“If you say so... You can talk to me about absolutely anything and I’ll never judge you, alright?” Mariel nodded quickly before looking away. Sloane smiled before turning to Nemura with a curious look. “What do you think the chances are of Stefan... you know?”

Nemura shook her head, a smirk playing on her lips. “None. He’s been positively smitten with that knight we left back in Nornport. I’d be surprised if he even looks at another woman. He’s even written her a few letters, you know.”

Sloane hummed thoughtfully. “Interesting,” she mused, her mind drifting to the Blade and his unexpected romantic inclinations.

The conversation drifted into comfortable silence as they continued to soak, each lost in their own thoughts. The warm water and steamy air cocooned them in a bubble of tranquility, a rare and cherished respite from the challenges that lay ahead.

Then their nice night was destroyed as a vicious villain of death and shadows attacked with unexpected ferocity. Sloane, about to share a relaxed word with Mariel, found herself rooted in place by an unforeseen and chilling sight.

Mariel's eyes had shifted from their pretty ice-blue into a deep, inky blackness, brimming with an eerie luminescence. A look of sudden inspiration crossed her face, her fingers hovering just above the surface of the water. "Oh! I got it!" she exclaimed with an air of discovery that belied the ominous change in her eyes.

Before Sloane could react, the once-steaming water around them underwent a startling transformation. In an instant, the soothing warmth was replaced by an icy chill that pierced through the steam and the comfort. Sloane's relaxed muscles tensed as she let out a sharp shriek, leaping up from the water. "What the hell, Mariel!?" she exclaimed, her voice echoing off the bathhouse walls.

Equally startled by her own unintended magic, Mariel's eyes widened in shock, and she hastily scrambled out of the bath. "Oh, oh that's cold," she stammered, wrapping her arms around herself as she shivered. The sudden cold had turned the steamy room into a fog of confusion and shivering bodies.

The other three women, also caught by surprise, quickly followed suit, emerging from the icy water with expressions of disbelief and discomfort. The serene atmosphere of the bathhouse had been thoroughly shattered, replaced by a flurry of activity as the five naked women all sought towels and robes to ward off the unexpected chill.

Sloane, teeth chattering, wrapped a towel around herself, shooting a half-exasperated, half-amused look at her daughter. "Remind me to have a talk with you about appropriate use of magic, young lady," she said, her tone a mix of mock sternness and genuine mirth.

My fucking nips could cut glass...

As if she could hear Sloane's thoughts, Nemura just started laughing. Sloane refused to see what the woman was looking or laughing at. It was probably the look on her face, anyways. Damned woman always found amusement in Sloane's expressions.

Mariel, still shivering, managed a sheepish grin. "Sorry, Mom," she replied, her apology punctuated by a small chuckle. "And everyone else."

Despite the abrupt end to their relaxing bath, the incident served as a lighthearted reminder of the unexpected twists their journey often took. And as they dried off and dressed, the laughter and banter that followed helped to rekindle the warmth that had been so suddenly stolen away by Mariel's impromptu magic.



Two days later, they arrived in Calling.

As the wagon and mounted paladins approached the capital of the Kingdom of Rosale, the morning sun cast its light over a grand cityscape that unfolded before them. The city, nestled along the winding river, was encircled by imposing walls that stood as silent sentinels. Beyond them, the heart of the kingdom pulsed with life.

The river itself was a bustling artery of commerce and travel. Ships of all sizes, from small fishing vessels to large merchant galleons, dotted the waterways, their sails and masts painting a lively maritime tapestry. The reflection of the sun on the water created a dazzling display of light, signaling the vibrant energy of the city.

Stefan guided the wagon with steady hands, his eyes taking in the impressive sight of the city. Mariel sat beside him, her gaze filled with wonder as she observed the river and the ships with keen interest.

As they neared the city gates, Nell rode up alongside them. "I'll handle the gate," she declared with confidence. True to her word, the paladin spoke briefly with the guards, and they were waved through with only a small entry fee per person.

The guards couldn't help but comment on Vesper, the large golem that lay in the back of the wagon. "That's quite a contraption you have there," one guard remarked, a mix of curiosity and awe in his voice.

Sloane, sitting comfortably in the wagon with the large canvas cover down in the nice sunny day, replied with a smile. "Thank you. She's been a great help on our journey."

Another guard provided Sloane with directions. "If you're looking for the Royal Arcanum, just follow the main road towards the city center. You can't miss it," he instructed, pointing them in the right direction.

They thanked him for the information and soon they were moving again.

Sloane cast a glance at Nemura as they passed through the gate. "You alright?" she asked.

The woman was leaning against the side of the wagon with her legs outstretched. She looked up with a genuine smile and replied, "Of course, why wouldn't I be?" Despite her words, there was a hint of something deeper in her expression.

Sloane moved closer, sitting beside her friend. "I'm sorry for all the pressure I've been putting on you, pretending to be a knight and all." Her voice was tinged with regret.

Nemura shrugged lightly, her golden eyes reflecting understanding. "It's fine. I get why we did it. I—"

"No," Sloane interrupted gently, placing a reassuring hand on Nemura's arm. "Let's stop pretending, okay?"

A flicker of surprise crossed her friend's face. "W-What do you mean?"

She nudged her playfully. "Don't get too excited, you goof. You know I'm not talking about that. You're my friend, and one of the closest I've made since arriving here. You don't have to be anything other than that for me. Not a retainer. Not a fake knight or even a real knight. Just be my friend, Nem." She looked up at the front where Mariel was pointing out something to Stefan and talking excitedly. "Someone who's joining me on this crazy trip to find my other daughter. Who's stuck by me through so much." She turned back to Nemura and looked up into her golden eyes. "What do you say?"

Her friend's arm wrapped around her and pulled Sloane into a firm embrace. "What are you talking about? We already are friends, stupid. You're *my* closest friend. I didn't mind pretending to be your knight, and it wasn't because of my people's culture that made it uncomfortable. Well, not all of it... It was because I was afraid. A fear of failing you. But I promise, I'll protect you and your family to the end."

Sloane looked away and shook her head. "...For someone who's afraid, you sure act honorable and heroic. And you're loyal to a fault. If that isn't what makes up a knight, I don't know what is, you big dummy." With her head resting against Nemura's strong arm, Sloane mused aloud, "My daughter's a princess, who surely has her own knights. She's made me out to be this queen, and every queen needs a queensguard, right?"

Nemura huffed in response, "You never needed that. You're strong enough on your own."

"No, maybe I don't need it... but having you by my side makes me feel safer all the same. And I know what we're going to do about this whole queen business, too. And everything else. We have to prepare to help Gwyn. She's got a House, one that I'm sure makes ours look tiny by comparison."

"I don't know if hers will be making as much coin, though."

Sloane chuckled. "Maybe not, but that's fine. With my plan we'll be able to help her. And Mariel."

Nemura leaned her head against Sloane's, her voice soft. "I'll be by your side, Sloane. I'm nearing my own refinement too."

"Good. I have a feeling you'll need to be strong for what comes."

"The world has changed so much, Slo. It's not the same as it used to be. What are we going to be when this is all said and done?"

"I don't know, but I know one thing *we'll* be."

“Oh?” the woman leaning on her queried, a note of curiosity in her voice. Her voice was softer now, as if it was just the two of them. No wagon, no crowds of people. Two best friends talking about the future.

“We’re best friends, Nemura. We’ll all be a family. Even grumpy Uncle Stefan.” Sloane’s words carried a warmth that filled the space between them.

“Best friends,” Nemura echoed, her voice a gentle murmur. “Like we’re young girls again.”

Sloane chuckled. “With how goofy you are? Age is just a number. I don’t feel like I’ve gotten older at all since coming here, you know? In fact, I feel *great*.”

“I’ve felt the same... But, best friends? I’ll take it.”

“Me too. Everyone needs a friend at their side in life.”

“Yeah? And what will we be doing, side-by-side?”

“Isn’t it obvious, Nemmy? We’re going to try to take over the world, of course.”

Her friend’s breathy laugh was contagious, and soon they were both engulfed in a fit of genuine, hearty laughter.

The city of Calling, with its lively streets and vibrant energy, seemed to welcome them with open arms as they delved deeper into its depths. The streets were lined with buildings of varying architectural styles, from traditional timbered houses to more elaborate stone structures. The air was filled with the sounds of merchants calling out their wares, the clatter of carriages, and the distant hum of the bustling river docks.

Stefan glanced back at Sloane and Nemura, who were comfortably leaning against each other. “We should find accommodations and then make a plan for everything we need to accomplish. There’s much to do.”

Mariel turned as well and caught sight of the pair in a moment of ease and contentment. Her face lit up with a soft, affectionate smile, and she silently mouthed ‘I love you’ to Sloane. It was a tender, heartfelt gesture that spoke volumes of the bond they shared. She was going to be fifteen soon, and despite almost being an adult by local standards, Mar had expressed that she wanted nothing more than the adoption to be official.

I love that kid. She’s like a bright shining star in the darkness.

Sloane returned the smile with a gentle nod, her eyes filled with warmth and gratitude for her daughter’s love. As she gazed out at the bustling city of Calling, her thoughts turned to the tasks ahead. They had finally arrived, and the city, with its grand walls and vibrant life, held the promise of new adventures, one that included making Mariel her legal daughter and making real progress on their journey to Gwyn.



Alyce listened to the question posed from one of the so-called ‘masters’ in the audience. When he finished, she forced herself not to sigh. These men and women worked in specialities that did not exist nearly three years ago now. All flailing around like children with inflated egos.

Rusting amateurs.

She put a smile on her face that she couldn’t make reach her eyes. “...Yes, I agree that this ‘enchancing ink’ from Marketbol is something that we need to import more of. However, we have several teams working on reproducing its effects as we speak. We’ve already secured a contract for as much as we’re able. Nevertheless, all of that is pointless if we cannot secure a supply chain beyond the gash.”

From there the audience launched into a series of inane questions that she wished Kat was here to answer. That had always been her sister’s job. She was the people person. But she was missing and who knows where on this rusted planet.

When she finally walked down from the stage, her assistant stepped up to her. The sun elf was an aetherblessed woman, like finding that perfect gear that you needed to make everything just *work*. She was no Kat; no one could replace her sister. But Ven was everything she needed to function in this world, because Alyce would blow a rusted gasket otherwise.

“Lady Maxwell, we got word of another... inventor entering the city,” the woman whispered into her ear.

Alyce perked up at the news. The Royal Arcanum wasn’t just a center of research and progress for Rosale, it was a beacon to the entire region once word had gotten out. Men and women of all sorts were flocking here to show off their ideas or to learn from them here.

“Tell me more.”

“A woman, either telv or terran. Likely terran. She has large metal... creatures. Animal-like that move, fly even. A guard at the *northern* gate gave her and her companions directions to here.”

Metal creatures? That’s... interesting. Alyce’s mind ran through the possibilities.

“What types of animals?”

“One is a falcon-like bird while the other is a massive feline creature with large appendages sprouting from its shoulders. A person could almost comfortably ride the feline. But the falcon is more of a realistic size.”

Oxylus

So, if she passed through the northern gate, that means she may have come from the gash. That held interesting implications on its own. *Did the army finally manage to create a gap?*

Or did the woman with these automatons?

Animals though... That held the clue. Likely specialized uses. The feline was clearly a stalking type animal, so hers was probably built for attacking. Appendages to allow for additional methods of attack. The biological—*no, they're automatons, that shouldn't matter.* The falcon was likely for scouting. Maybe a first attempt, but flight? *How did she pull that off? Clearly magic. No way she did that with realistic physics. Rusting magic throwing a wrench in the proper laws.*

There was maybe a moral reason for not wanting to create something more... humanoid.

Oh, this would do nicely.

Alyce could learn from this, and who knew what else the woman may know. Alyce had so much she could trade this woman. Or even purchase; after all, she had access to the royal treasury. The king wouldn't balk at any price to secure safety for their people. If she could get golem designs then she could augment the army; make the kingdom safe. When the kingdom was safe, she wouldn't feel bad about leaving Tanyth to find Kat.

She smiled at Ven. "Can you try and set up a meeting with her for me?"

The Wanderlust is so close to finished. Just a few more things... This is just what we need.