

---

## Royal Negotiations

“Queen Sloane,” King Tanyth greeted her with a courteous nod, his voice rich with the cadence of authority. “It is an absolute pleasure to meet you. I’ve heard many good things from Alyce, not to mention the reports that I have heard concerning your success in Nornport.” He then focused on the raithe girl next to her and nodded. “And you, as well, princess.”

*Damn it.* Sloane managed a poised nod in return as her mind raced. Beside her, Mariel stood with the quiet dignity she’d been practicing, though the corners of her lips twitched with a suppressed smile at the title ‘princess.’

Sloane felt every bit the part of a visitor from a distant land as she stood before the king, a title she had never truly coveted, yet now clung to her with a persistence that both amused and annoyed her.

*Thanks, Gwyn. I can’t wait to get you back for this.*

The king was a striking figure; his majestic presence was marked by his light brown skin, a canvas for the intricate tattoo on his temple that curved around his right eye. His regal bearing was enhanced by the long, white dreadlocks gathered up and held together by an elaborate metal ring and fell neatly down his back, secured away from his sharp, contemplative features. He wore a high-collared, white and brown tunic with golden embroidery, the attire of a sovereign, and held himself with a grace that commanded respect, his hand raised in an elegant gesture of acknowledgment.

*Holy shit, Alyce. You go girl. He’s a cutie,* she mused internally, a smirk threatening to break her diplomatic facade.

Basically, he was everything the fake-queen was not. Well, at least in bearing. Sloane felt she was a very attractive woman, and she’d been hit on a lot since arriving, so it appeared she wasn’t alone in that belief. She loved the way she looked with all this high constitution. Her skin had never been so flawless. No wrinkles or grey hair yet either. Not bad for a thirty-seven-year-old woman.

“Your Majesty,” Sloane responded with a respectful incline of her head, “the pleasure is mine. Although, I must confess, I am curious about the source of your information. I’ve shared my history with very few in this realm. After all, my kingdom is back on Earth. Is a queen truly a queen if she is without her people? Here I can only claim to be a baroness.”

*I’m hotter now than I was back on Earth. Thank you essentia, you know how to please a girl.*

She snuck a glance at Alyce who was staring at her mouth agape.

The king's chuckle was rich and resonant as he took in both his advisor's reaction and Sloane's response. "Indeed, one's status is often a matter of circumstance, but a queen's bearing transcends borders and realms. Your actions have spoken volumes, Queen Sloane. Your business in Nornport has not gone unnoticed, and your innovation with the Banking Guild has sparked significant interest. But if you want the truth, Dawn's Rise is here in my nation and I pride myself on a close relationship with the Church."

Alyce frowned and Sloane saw her mouthing the words 'Banking Guild' with an inquisitive look.

Sloane's gaze sharpened at the mention of her work, a mixture of pride and wariness threading through her. "Your Majesty honors me with his words," she replied, keeping her tone neutral yet friendly. "I assume there's more to this meeting than kind accolades. Alyce has been rather mysterious about the purpose."

King Tanyth nodded, his eyes gleaming with a businesslike focus. "Indeed. We face challenging times, and Rosale could benefit greatly from your expertise. Alyce speaks highly of your work, and I confess that I have seen it as well in the gift I managed to procure for her. I was hoping to discuss hiring your services to assist Alyce in her project. She is but one brilliant woman, and I believe if she were to have you there, then it would help secure the defenses of the realm much sooner."

Alyce's earlier enthusiasm suddenly made sense, and Sloane found herself weighing the potential benefits and risks of such a partnership. "Collaboration could be mutually advantageous. My daughter and I, however, are on a quest of our own. Any agreement would need to align with our goals and timeline. I must confess that I am amenable, but I must depart once spring arrives."

The king leaned forward in interest. "I am aware of your journey to the Kingdom of Avira with a paladin escort. I haven't been told the reason, and I will not pry into the matter, but I assume it has something to do with the Archpriestess. So, I would not propose anything that would hinder your timeline. In fact, I believe we can offer assistance in that regard as well."

Sloane's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. She already had ideas of what she wanted, but it wouldn't hurt to hear his own. "Assistance? In what way, Your Majesty?"

King Tanyth's smile was knowing. "Coin, information, resources—whatever you require to ensure a swift and successful journey. Rosale would be indebted to you, and I would see that debt honored. I am also grateful for your investment in our nation with your company. I foresee great things from a partnership with you through my lovely advisor."

Alyce's cheeks couldn't have turned redder at that comment and Sloane did smile as she watched the girl try not to die from unexpected swooning.

She extended her hand, the gesture both a sign of agreement and a challenge. “Then let us speak of specifics, King Tanyth. If we are to stand united in purpose, let us ensure our goals are aligned and our paths set toward a common horizon.”

When the king’s hand met hers, the clasp was firm and assured. She smiled. “Agreed, Queen Sloane.”

Alyce, who had been observing the exchange with an amiable expression, gracefully rose to her feet. She turned towards Mariel, her words infused with a cheerful warmth. “Hey, Mariel,” she said, her tone light and inviting. “Why don’t I show you around the palace? Let your mom and Tanyth discuss the more boring details. And if they get caught up, I’m sure your mom wouldn’t mind us exploring the *Wanderlust*.”

Mariel’s face brightened with excitement, her eyes sparkling with the prospect of adventure. She pivoted towards Sloane, turning the puppy dog eyes up to eleven as she looked up at her. “Mom—can I?” she pleaded, her voice filled with excitement.

Sloane replied with a soft chuckle and an affectionate glance. “Go ahead. Have fun.”

There was no way she could say no to that cute face.

With a bounce in her step, Mariel eagerly joined Alyce, leaving Sloane and Tanyth. The king then gestured for Sloane to follow him. They walked at a measured pace through the opulent corridor, Tanyth sharing insights into the palace’s storied history, each word painting a vivid picture of bygone eras.

The journey unexpectedly led them to Tanyth’s office, a space exuding an air of solemnity and purpose. Yet, to Sloane’s surprise, instead of delving into a formal discussion, Tanyth guided her through a set of doors that opened onto a balcony.

The view that awaited them was gorgeous. The expansive city skyline unfolded before them in a display of architectural grandeur and serene beauty that had her wishing she could take a picture to capture it forever.

“I really must say, your kingdom is beautiful. Excuse my language, but we have been through some *shit* since I arrived in this world. First Westaren which is an absolute mess. Then the Sovereign Cities literally right at the start of the war. I know you are having some serious troubles with monsters right now, but this is the safest I’ve felt in three years. I have stayed in the inns and walked through villages, towns, and now two cities. It’s surprising to me that I haven’t heard a single negative thing about you, Tanyth.”

The handsome man’s gaze lingered on the horizon, a thoughtful expression playing across his features. He then turned towards Sloane, his eyes reflecting a mix of appreciation and a hint of sorrow.

“Thank you, Sloane. Your words mean a great deal, especially considering the hardships you've endured. It's true, our kingdom has its share of challenges, but we strive to uphold a sense of security and prosperity for all who reside here. I hear I have you to thank for some of that. Tales of what you and your small group did in the Heartlands' Pass have spread. You've helped many people with your actions. It seems to be a common theme with you, Sloane.”

She smiled and stared to watch how the sun started to dip in the sky behind the city. It really was beautiful. “I just like to leave things a bit better than I found them. I do admit that it's not all altruistic. I need money to fund what I'm doing and what comes after.” When he didn't respond, Sloane leaned against the balcony railing, her eyes scanning the panoramic view of the city. “It's remarkable, really. You've managed to maintain relative stability in times when the world seems to be on edge. That's no small feat.”

Tanyth nodded, a small smile playing on his lips. “It's a constant effort, one that requires both vigilance and compassion. We're fortunate to have a strong community. And, of course, people like Alyce have been invaluable in helping us innovate and adapt to new challenges.”

Sloane glanced back at the palace, contemplating the king's words. “Speaking of Alyce, she's been wonderful to get to know. Her knowledge and expertise are astounding. It's rare to find someone so passionate and skilled.”

Yes, Alyce is a rare talent,” Tanyth agreed, his tone indicating a blend of respect and fondness. “She's been instrumental in our efforts to advance technology and magic here in Rosale. Her work on the *Wanderlust* is just one example of the incredible potential we have to change our kingdom for the better. You know the Arcanum was all her idea. To create a place where like minds could gather and collaborate. She's... *brilliant*.”

Sloane smiled as she heard the clear affection in his voice.

As Sloane and King Tanyth stood conversing on the balcony, the serenity of the moment was gently punctuated by the arrival of a servant who was carrying a tray with an air of practiced elegance. The servant's approach, though unobtrusive, caught the king's attention, and he excused himself from the conversation to receive the tray. With a courteous nod, he offered one of the glasses to Sloane—a sparkling amber beverage that captured the afternoon light in a dance of golden hues.

Accepting the glass, Sloane took a tentative sip, her taste buds greeted by the rich complexity of the drink, a delightful blend that momentarily shifted her focus from the panoramic cityscape before them. “This is excellent,” she remarked appreciatively, holding the glass aloft to observe its color more closely.

## Oxylus

Tanyth's smile broadened slightly. "It's a local favorite, brewed right here in the city. I often find it helps clear the mind, particularly when delving into the intricacies of statecraft and potential partnerships."

With a nod of thanks, Sloane turned her attention back to the king as their conversation meandered into deeper waters. Tanyth spoke candidly about his ambitions for the kingdom, his voice reflecting both determination and a hint of concern. The conversation gradually steered toward the *Wanderlust* and how he wished it to be just the first of a fleet of skyships that would help alleviate the burdens of the paladins, freeing them to join the efforts against the ever-growing monster threat in the Heartwoods.

They spoke of details, and he offered to help her travel to Avira, which was what she wanted, but not in the way she needed. There was also something else. In the end, she wanted to take the time to discuss it with the others and return the next day if possible.

He happily agreed.

As their meeting drew to a close, he escorted Sloane back through the palace, their path leading them towards the grounds where the skyship stood proudly. As they ascended the stairs onto the deck, Sloane's ears caught the unmistakable sound of Mariel's voice, brimming with youthful excitement.

"I can't wait until mom sees the cannons!"

Sloane's steps faltered slightly, her mind racing. As she ascended the final steps to the deck of the *Wanderlust*, she caught sight of her daughter's wide-eyed excitement. Mariel stood beside Alyce, both of them in animated conversation, gesturing towards the four cannons that were installed on the ship's deck.

*I may have forgotten about those in my excitement to see the engine room's enchantments.*

"The cannons are certainly something, sweetheart," Sloane said.

Mariel's eyes lit up. "Mom! The ship is so amazing!"

Sloane joined them and found herself amused as they talked for a while. Mariel excitedly regurgitated Alyce's words about the mechanics and potential of the cannons, her words tumbling out in a rapid stream of fascination. Sloane listened, her concerns momentarily set aside by the sheer joy and passion in her daughter's voice.

Eventually, the conversation wound down, and it was time to say goodbye. Alyce invited Sloane for more coffee in the morning before returning to meet with the king. Sloane didn't even get to reply before Mariel agreed for the both of them.

Mariel's excitement did not dim as she chattered all the way back to the inn, her stories and observations filling the air with a sense of adventure and discovery. Sloane smiled, listening and occasionally interjecting, her heart full as she listened to her daughter.

And she couldn't help but giggle when her little necromancer talked about ways to drop skeletons from the skyship so they could attack anything below.

Upon returning to the inn, Sloane and Mariel found Stefan and Nemura in the common area. They sat down together, the group forming a small circle of trust and companionship. Stefan looked up from his drink, his expression one of mild curiosity, while Nemura leaned back in her chair, a welcoming smile on her face.

Sloane began to recount the day's events, sharing details of her conversation with King Tanyth and the potential collaboration on the skyship. Mariel chipped in with her own enthusiastic retelling of her tour, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

As their companions finished their drinks, the group migrated towards Sloane and Mariel's room, a space that had become a common ground for their serious discussions. Settling into the chairs, with Mariel comfortably perched on the bed, immersed in her magical play, the atmosphere was ripe for planning.

"So," Sloane initiated. She paused, gathering her thoughts. "I have a plan, and I want everyone to listen before jumping to conclusions."

Nemura tilted her head. "Should Nell be included in this conversation?"

Sloane's frown conveyed her decision. "No. Nell is an ally, but this discussion is for those I trust implicitly," she affirmed, casting an inclusive glance at Mariel. Her daughter looked up from where she was forming Mister Biggleworth and gave her a thumbs up. Sloane nodded back.

She turned back to the other two. Her friends.

"Alright, so..."

She recounted her discussion with the king in full, explaining how he wanted her help with the *Wanderlust* and the reason they wanted it completed. Sloane gave her thoughts on why they wanted her help. It wasn't because Alyce couldn't do it—she very much could in time. Unfortunately, time was not something the king could really afford. So, utilizing Sloane's expertise would allow them to speed up the process and allow Alyce to focus on other crucial tasks rather than being spread thin.

"Now, tell us your plan," Stefan said as Sloane smiled.

"This is going to take a bit of work from you and I, Stefan," Sloane said with a knowing smile as he visibly winced. "And Mariel, this involves a substantial change for you."

Mariel's expression shifted from curiosity to confusion. "What change?"

Sloane took a moment before answering, ensuring she had everyone's full attention. "I've been exploring the idea of establishing a new Guild, with Alyce's collaboration. But to do so effectively, I need to address my titles, or rather, my supposed royal status."

They all nodded as they followed along.

She paused, allowing the information to sink in before continuing, "I am going to abdicate my status as queen for whatever the hell country I was a monarch for back on Earth. Likely Italy if Gwyn set this up. That just leaves my actual peerage for Blightwych. I will disclaim my title for that."

Mariel interjected, a mix of surprise and apprehension in her voice. "What does that mean for you?"

"It means I will relinquish my baroness title," Sloane clarified. "And as my heir, that title will pass to you, Mariel."

Mar's eyes grew wide with the realization of the responsibility being hers. "Me? A baroness?"

"Yes," Sloane affirmed with a nod. "It will involve some adjustments, especially with your ongoing studies, but you'll become Baroness Mariel Reinhart of wherever Ismeld is granting us. That's something we need to figure out as well. She said we would have a holding on the islands, so after we get Gwyn, we'll likely need to visit."

Mariel nodded as she picked up and hugged Mister Bigglesworth close to her chest.

Stefan, understanding the broader implications, chimed in, "You're aiming to become the grandmaster of an Artificer's Guild."

"Exactly," Sloane confirmed. "The plan is to align Alyce's role as a guildmaster with her duties as an advisor, making the transition seamless. This move also addresses the issue of Gwyn's claim about my queenship and aligns perfectly with my post-Gwyn goals. We've already established Centers; establishing a Guild is the next logical step. I've discussed this with Aila and others who I'm sure would be interested in joining."

She paused, looking at each of them in turn. "So, what are your thoughts on this?"

Nemura leaned back, her expression contemplative as she processed Sloane's plan. "It's a bold move, Sloane," she finally spoke. "Shifting from nobility to a position with the guilds is no small feat. From baroness to grandmaster, though? That's huge. It's a smart way to leverage your skills and position for the benefit of everyone, especially considering your future with Gwyn."

Stefan nodded in agreement. "It's a sound strategy. I don't know what your daughter's situation is, but if she is in control of any territory, just establishing your headquarters there will be a massive boon. And as for Mariel," he turned to the young girl, "this could be a stepping stone for your own future. A chance to carve out your own path."

Mariel managed a timid smile. “I... I think I can do it. If it helps Mom and Gwyn, then I’m all for it. I’ll just need a bit of guidance along the way.”

“Of course, you will,” Sloane reassured, her pride in Mariel evident. “We’ll be here every step of the way.”

As the conversation wound down, the weight of the day began to settle on them. Nemura stretched and stood up. “I think that’s enough strategizing for one night. We should all get some rest. Big changes are coming, and we’ll need all our strength.”

Stefan stood up, his chair scraping softly against the floor. “Agreed. Goodnight, Sloane, Mariel. Should we reconvene tomorrow?”

“Yes, we will. Mariel and I are going to meet with Alyce at the cafe, then we’ll head over to meet with the king.”

After Stefan and Nemura had departed, Sloane turned her full attention to Mariel, noticing the mix of excitement and apprehension in her daughter’s eyes. She extinguished the fire in the lamp and moved closer to the bed. Sitting on the edge, she patted the bed beside her, inviting her daughter to join her. Mariel, still a bundle of energy despite the late hour, bounced over and settled next to Sloane.

“Hey, kiddo,” she began softly, keeping her voice warm and reassuring. “I know this is a lot. Becoming a baroness, the responsibilities, the changes... It’s big, but I know you can handle it. You’ve grown so much, and I’m here to help you every step of the way.”

Mariel looked up at Sloane, her voice barely above a whisper, “Mom, I’m going to be a baroness.” Her voice wavered slightly, a mix of excitement and uncertainty. “I...” Tears welled in her eyes.

Sloane wrapped her arms around Mariel, pulling her close. “Yes, you are. Baroness Mariel Reinhart. It does have a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?” she said with a gentle smile.

“It’s just... so much, Mom. But I’m also excited. I want to do this for us, and for myself.”

“I’m so proud of you, Mariel. You’re going to be a fantastic baroness. And remember, you’re an incredible person first and foremost. This is just the start of your journey, and I’m honored to be a part of it. We’re in this together, always,” Sloane reassured her, her voice filled with warmth and pride.

Mariel nestled into her mother’s embrace as if trying to get more comfortable. Sloane moved them so that they were leaning against the pillows and headboard. Mariel wiggled her way down until her head was resting in Sloane’s lap.

Sloane smiled and started threading her fingers through her daughter’s raven colored hair.



They lay like that for a while, but then Mariel turned slightly so that she could look up at her. “Do you ever feel like everything’s just been a dream? Like it’s all been a joke and you’re going to wake up and all the good things will be gone?”

Sloane kissed the top of her head. “I think about that every day,” she admitted in a whisper. “But then I look at you and know it’s the best dream in the world and I wouldn’t change it for anything.”

Mariel smiled softly, but then her brows scrunched up. Sloane knew her daughter was caught up in so many thoughts. It was expected. Mariel was given away by her parents, she’d believed that she would live her entire life with the Church... and Sloane had burst into her life like a wildfire and completely flipped the table on everything. Now she was set to become a noble. Sloane couldn’t even imagine how that would feel.

Her daughter had a pained look on her face. “What about my magic? I don’t want to stop doing that. What about...” She sighed.

“Being a baroness doesn’t mean you stop being you. You’ll just be you with a fancier title,” Sloane said.

Mariel lay there quietly for a bit, then a giggle came from her as she rubbed at her eyes. She adopted a mock-serious tone. “As Baroness, I decree that all spiders must wear tiny hats so they’re less scary.”

Sloane burst out laughing. “I will agree with anything that makes them less scary, including nuking them from orbit. But where are we going to find hats small enough for all the spiders?”

Mariel, brimming with youthful energy, hopped up and nestled close to her mother. She rested her head on Sloane’s shoulder, their fingers intertwining in a tender gesture that sent warmth through Sloane’s chest. “Oh, that’s easy. Since I’m the baroness, I’ll just order Stefan to knit them.”

Sloane playfully nudged her. “I’m not sure Stefan has the patience for knitting. But I like your thinking. A baroness with a spider-hat decree, not to mention her order of bone-knights.”

Their laughter mingled, filling the room with warmth and joy. Once the laughter subsided, Sloane looked at Mariel with eyes full of love and admiration. “In all seriousness, Mar, I am so incredibly proud of you. You’ve grown into such an amazing young woman, and you’re going to be a remarkable baroness.”

Mariel’s smile softened, a glimmer of tears in her eyes reflecting her deep emotions. “Thank you, Mom. I’ll give it my all, for you, for Gwyn, and for our future.”

Sloane pulled her daughter into a tight embrace. “That’s all I could ever hope for. Now, let’s get some rest. Tomorrow is a new day with new adventures.”

“Goodnight, Mom,” Mariel whispered as she lay down and snuggled into her covers.

“*Buona notte*. I love you,” Sloane whispered back.

Mariel nestled into her mother’s embrace, a sense of comfort and confidence enveloping her. “I love you, Mom.”

The morning dawned with the gentle light of the sun filtering through the curtains, stirring Sloane and Mariel from their peaceful slumber. In the comfort of their room, they stirred to life, the air filled with a sense of purpose and anticipation for the day ahead. Sloane stretched languidly, her mind already ticking through the day’s agenda while Mariel yawned, her eyes still heavy with sleep.

As they prepared for the day, the room buzzed with a quiet energy. Sloane was methodical and precise as she packed her essentials and checked on Vesper, who was coming with them for the day’s engagements. The large golem waited patiently, its presence both reassuring and formidable. Meanwhile, Tiberius was going to accompany Nemura, who had her own plans in joining five of the paladins for a day of rigorous training.

Stefan had already set off early for the banking guild. He was going to be meeting the guildmaster to discuss her plans and gain support for the proposed Artificer’s Guild.

Nell had joined her and Mariel as a show of support, which Sloane appreciated. At least until the woman had smirked and said it was more of a statement of support for the Reinhart family than Nell to Sloane.

Which... fair. Gwyn was apparently the important one, even if Nell nor Sloane had what she felt was a true reason other than her daughter had been seen in some visions.

After a relaxing and nourishing breakfast with coffee at the cafe with Alyce, whose company had become a delightful staple of their mornings, Sloane, Nell, and Mariel joined her and made their way to the palace. The walk was brisk, filled with light conversation and occasional laughter, a beautiful start to what promised to be a momentous day.

Upon reaching the palace, they were led through the grand halls to the king’s private office.

Suddenly, Mariel’s eyes locked onto two knights conversing outside of their destination. One was a tall sun elf with striking features, and the other a gorgeous moon elf woman, her dark blue hair almost black was set in a long braid down her shoulders. As Sloane and the group approached, the sun elf man excused himself and walked away. Mariel, however, stood frozen, staring at the remaining knight.

Sloane, noticing her daughter’s sudden halt, turned to her with concern. “You alright?” she asked, her voice laced with worry.

Mariel hesitated, then forced a smile. “Y-Yeah. Mom, you go ahead. I’ll wait out here. It’s probably going to be boring anyways.”

Sloane studied her daughter’s face, sensing something was off, but nodded reluctantly. “Alright, if you’re sure.”

“I’ll stay with her,” Nell spoke up from behind Sloane.

Grateful for Nell’s presence, Sloane gave her a thankful nod and proceeded to follow Alyce into the king’s office. Just as she stepped away, she overheard Mariel striking up a conversation with the moon elf knight. “Hey there. So, how do you like this gig with the king? I happen to be a baroness.”

Sloane couldn’t help but groan softly, a mixture of amusement and exasperation at her daughter’s boldness. She shook her head slightly, smiling despite herself, as she entered the room with Alyce.

The engineer said a very informal ‘hey, Tanyth’ to the king before she moved to a spot by the bookcase where she sank into a chair with a casual grace. Without even looking around, she reached for a book with a well-worn bookmark peeking out from its pages and dove into it.

Which left just her and Tanyth to talk while Alyce basically ignored them in favor of some book.

Sloane, observing the king’s lingering glances towards Alyce, couldn’t help but tease. “King Tanyth, if you’d like... we can give you a few moments alone,” she said, her voice low and playful, accompanied by a knowing wink.

His head jerked back to her. After one more stolen glance at Alyce he sighed. “I appear to be quite transparent. I hope you won’t hold this informality against me, Sloane.”

The use of just her name was nice. She liked it and it instantly made her feel at ease.

“Why Tanyth, I would never hold burgeoning love against anyone.”

The king died.

Or rather, his body revolted with the fervor of William Wallace as the handsome man started choking on his own spit. She let him quell the rebellion and regain his faculties with an amused expression on her face.

Alyce, distracted from her book, called out in concern but Tanyth waved her off, still coughing. The skyship engineer just shrugged and went back to her reading. *Ruthless.*

After regaining his composure with a glass of water, Tanyth addressed Sloane with a relaxed familiarity. “Shit. You can’t try to assassinate me like that, Sloane,” he joked, a hint of relief in his tone.

She burst into laughter. “Ha. You alright now? Get it all out?”

Tanyth sighed and took another drink of water. “Yes. Well then. How’d you know?”

“I took a guess but you just confirmed it,” Sloane replied, her smirk evident.

“I trust you won’t—”

“You know, I think everyone knows. But I won’t be the one to say it.”

“Fair enough.”

Their banter gave way to serious discussion as Sloane introduced Vesper to the king, who expressed genuine fascination with the golem. Their conversation was briefly interrupted by Alyce’s amused observation peeking over her book, her crinkled eyes betraying her interest.

In the cozy warmth of the hearth, Tanyth’s demeanor softened, the smile on his face a clear indication of his fondness for Alyce. It was adorable. It was a rare glimpse of the king’s more personal side, one that Sloane found endearing. He motioned towards the plush chairs arranged before the crackling fire, and they both settled into their seats, the flames casting a gentle glow on their faces as they turned to the matters at hand.

“So, have you come to a decision?” Tanyth inquired, his voice carrying a hint of anticipation.

She fixed her gaze on the dancing flames as she nodded affirmatively. “I have,” she began. “I will assist you with the Wanderlust, but in return, I need the support of you and Alyce in establishing the Artificer’s Guild.”

At that moment, the sound of a closing book echoed softly in the room, followed by Alyce’s footsteps approaching them. The pink haired woman leaned against Tanyth’s chair. “I’ve been mulling over a similar idea,” Alyce interjected. “The problem is that I really only care about Rosale. I don’t care about the rest of the continent.”

Sloane’s lips curved into a smile. “That fits in with my plan perfectly. I believe a branch—and temporary headquarters—built here would be highly beneficial for your kingdom. Alyce would be its guildmaster, which would align with her current duties nicely. I would abdicate as Queen of a kingdom back on Earth, which holds no relevance here, and I would disclaim my baroness title from Blightwych in favor of my daughter Mariel.”

King Tanyth considered her words. “This... has potential. But what do we get out of what is effectively making you a Grandmaster?”

“I will help Alyce keep her skyship in the air. She’s done the hard part already and I could never have gotten as far as she has. She’s brilliant, but it’s clear that her world did not work on electronics like mine did. So, with my expertise in runes and other types of constructs I will be able to provide that assistance she needs to get it done quickly. Which will be good, because I have zero doubt in her ability to learn it and apply it to future ships, or even improve it. I will also send a courier to my director in

Nornport about expanding into the golem business here. I have several designs that are well-suited to the challenges you face here, all developed from my experiences with Tiberius and Vesper, my existing golems.”

She paused for a moment before continuing, “But that’s not all. I’d like a ride to Avira. Maireharbora would be preferred, but even somewhere close like the Lehelia Queendom would be fine. I’m sure Alyce can attest, flight makes travel significantly faster. How fast can your skyship fly, Alyce?”

The woman frowned as she lapsed into thought for a moment. “We didn’t get up to top speed, but somewhere between thirty to forty knots?”

“So, there and back wouldn’t take more than a week. I was looking at maps last night and plotted a few routes. Maireharbora is around seven-seventy kilometers while Cresthelm is only five hundred.”

The king took the time to ponder what Sloane was asking.

Unfortunately it was clear he was reserved when he responded, “The potential benefits of your expertise are clear,” he acknowledged, “but the request for transportation to Avira... That’s a significant commitment. The *Wanderlust* is a key asset to our kingdom, and with the monsters...”

However, Alyce stood silently with a contemplative expression.

Sloane sensed the hesitation in the air and knew she had to offer something more to tip the scales in her favor. She took a deep breath. “I know neither of you are aware,” she began, her voice steady yet imbued with a sense of urgency, “but I think I can trust the two of you. I am trying to reach my daughter. We were separated by the Flash and she’s in Avira. The faster I can reach her, the better.”

Tanyth and Alyce exchanged a look, a silent conversation passing between them, after Sloane revealed the reason behind her urgency to reach Avira. It was clear that her plight had struck a chord. Alyce’s earlier enthusiasm shifted into a deep concern as she leaned forward, her eyes meeting Sloane’s with an intensity that spoke volumes.

“Sloane, I had no idea,” Alyce said quietly. “That changes things. Tanyth, we have to help her. The *Wanderlust* can make a difference here.”

Tanyth exhaled softly, his gaze shifting between Sloane and Alyce as he clearly weighed the situation. Alyce’s eyes glistened with unshed tears, her expression a mixture of resolve and vulnerability. “My sister is also out there. Somewhere,” she confessed quietly. “That’s one reason we built the *Wanderlust*. Not just to help protect my new home, but to go out and search for my sister.”

The king nodded solemnly. “It’s up to you, Alyce,” he said, turning back to Sloane. “She’s right. The ship was built not only for protection, but for reunification. For journeys like yours and

hers.” He reached over, placing a gentle hand on Alyce’s. “All I ask is that in your travels, you keep an eye out for Katrina.”

Sloane felt a surge of gratitude, her own eyes mirroring Alyce’s emotion. “Thank you, both of you,” she said earnestly. “This means more than you can imagine.”

“How old is your daughter,” Alyce asked.

“She just turned fourteen in mid Autumn.”

King Tanyth’s expression softened with empathy. “So young when you arrived here…”

“She was ten.”

Without hesitation, Alyce closed the distance between them, enveloping Sloane in a comforting embrace. “Rust, I can only imagine how tough it must have been. We’ll help you find her, that’s a promise.”

As Alyce stepped back, Tanyth’s eyes widened in realization. “Wait, your daughter—she wouldn’t happen to be the terran princess known for her fire magic in Avira, would she?”

*Fire magic? I hadn’t heard that yet, but there’s no one else. Oh fuck, seriously? She’s the terran princess I’ve been hearing rumors about since fucking Swanbrook? Fuuuck.*

A smile broke through Sloane’s solemnity. “Yup, that’s my Gwyn.”

“Huh. Some of the things I’ve heard…” The king appeared thoughtful for a moment. “There’s much to discuss if you’d like to hear some of the rumors that had made it this way. Perhaps over dinner? Alyce, you’re available this evening?”

Alyce nodded enthusiastically. “Absolutely, I wouldn’t miss it.”

Tanyth cleared his throat, a slight flush coloring his cheeks.

“Mariel would love to join us,” Sloane added. “Let’s spend the afternoon working on the Wanderlust. We have a season to extend its flight capability. Oh, and Tanyth,” she added, turning back to him, “we might need that core you bought at the auction in Nornport.”

Alyce looked puzzled.

The king sighed. “I intended it as a gift for Alyce.”

“Now it’ll serve a greater purpose for her project,” Sloane said decisively.

Tanyth acquiesced. “Very well, I’ll have it delivered to the workshop. Meanwhile, I’ll expedite the necessary arrangements for the Artificer’s Guild.”

Sloane’s expression brightened. “Excellent. I’ve already set the wheels in motion with the Banking Guild. My assistant is there now. I know that they’ll be more than willing to assist.”

“That should streamline things,” Tanyth noted. “Once we convene for a formal meeting, we can officially launch the guild. As for the guild hall, we need a suitable location.”

Alyce chimed in, “Why not the Arcanum? It’s spacious and could easily serve a dual purpose as the guild hall. Especially if this won’t be the headquarters? It’s perfect.”

Sloane had to admit, it had a certain appeal. They could move in tomorrow if they needed. Obviously it would probably take some time, but still. It felt good to have things work out in her favor.

The three of them discussed a bit more of the specifics until it was time for the king to get to his next meeting. As Sloane rose to leave, she felt a sense of accomplishment coupled with the warmth of newfound alliances. Behind her, Tanyth and Alyce were already deep in discussion, their voices a blend of professional and personal tones. As Vesper joined her at the door, Sloane caught the tail end of their conversation.

“So~! You got me another gift, did you? You’re too sweet!” Alyce’s voice carried a playful tease, her words floating out of the office with a lightheartedness that contrasted the weighty discussions of the day.

Sloane paused for a moment, her hand on the doorknob, as the sound of their laughter followed her out. Despite the looming challenges and responsibilities, there was still room for joy. Closing the door behind her, Sloane’s thoughts drifted to the tasks at hand, but Alyce’s cheerful voice remained a comforting backdrop.

She couldn’t help but smile.