
Inner Self

Sloane was in her room at the inn, its largest and the only one with a second bed. Unfortunately, that bed was small, which meant that Mariel would be using it.

Leaving her to share with the infamous bed hogger.

Nemura.

Sometimes I feel like she does it on purpose. No one likes to wake up with an arm in their face and their ass hanging off the bed you Amazon-looking wench.

The door opened, revealing a laughing Mariel and Nemura as the two entered the room. They were both out of their armor for now—just like Sloane was—and would get them back on if needed, but the paladins believed they would be good for a night or two.

Mariel's blue-grey eyes were bright, her laughter a light melody that danced through the air, a stark contrast to the usual tension that hung around them.

Nemura followed, a grin splitting her face, her copper hair tousled as if she'd just weathered a storm of hilarity.

“What’s so funny?” Sloane asked, arching an eyebrow as she watched them.

Mariel gasped for breath, trying to compose herself. “You should have seen it, Mom. Nemura here tried to help one of the villagers with a cart, and—”

She broke off into giggles.

“And let me guess, she ended up breaking something?” Sloane surmised, the corner of her mouth twitching upwards.

Nemura rolled her eyes, but her smile remained. “I may have underestimated my own strength. Again.” She shrugged, unbothered by her own mishap. “But it’s all sorted now.”

Sloane shook her head, a smile finally breaking through. “I’m starting to think we should have a ‘Nemura-proof’ rating on things around you.”

Mariel chuckled, flopping onto her small bed. “That would require a whole new scale.”

Nemura moved to sit beside Sloane, her presence a comforting weight. “How are you holding up?” she asked, her voice lowering to a more serious tone, her playful demeanor shifting to concern.

Sloane sighed, the weight of her worries momentarily surfacing. "I'm managing," she replied, her gaze flickering towards the window, where the night sky was a tapestry of stars and dark clouds that hid one of the Sisters. "Just..."

Nemura placed a gentle hand on Sloane's shoulder. "We'll get to her, Sloane. You're not alone in this."

"That's not..." Sloane sighed and glanced at her daughter. "So, I saw your new spellwork."

Nemura winced, and pulled back her hand, clearly recognizing the change in subject for what it was.

The teenaged raithe rolled to her side and beamed. "It went great! And I'm step forty-five now."

Sloane whistled. "You've almost caught Stefan."

She turned to Nemura and raised a brow.

The large telv woman rolled her eyes. "I am now step fifty-five. I do believe I'm catching up, Slo."

"*Slow* is right," Sloane replied with a wink. "Although, I have something important to talk about. I had something... interesting happen when I hit step sixty-four."

She wasn't sure what path advancement *meant*, but she had a decent idea. It was likely something to do with a class upgrade. Which had massive potential to increase her magical strength. She'd still yet to figure out how her so-called 'purpose' did for her, because it felt like she could make any magic she wanted. Her leading theory so far was that it mainly affected the efficiency of her spells, although she wasn't sure how to test that.

As far as the path advancement went, she also didn't know how to do it. So, it was better to be prepared for anything.

As Nemura sat down next to her, Sloane took a deep breath. "I think now will be the best time to try this. So, with that... I have no idea what to expect, but whatever happens it'll help all of you."

"What *is* a path advancement?"

Sloane shrugged. "I think it will make my current path stronger, but don't quote me. There are many ways this could go based on what I can think of from back home. This could be quick, or it could take a while. And don't be surprised if I pass out like I did with Vesper. The biggest thing is, please just look out for me."

Mariel piped up from her bed, "Don't worry, Mom. We'll be right here. Right, Nemmy?"

Nemura's gaze didn't leave Sloane's face searching for something. After a long look she nodded. "That's right, Bones. I'll protect you, Slo."

She said it with such a solemn tone that Sloane felt her cheeks heat up. Sloane reached over and patted Nemura's leg. "I know you will. You're my queensguard, afterall. I trust you."

It was the other woman's turn to blush and she quickly brushed a hand through her hair which made Sloane chuckle. "I'm going to try this."

Mariel jumped up and rushed her, slamming into her with a hug. "I love you. Be careful," her daughter whispered.

"Maybe you should lie down," Nemura suggested.

Sloane looked between them, her makeshift family in this chaotic world, and felt a surge of gratitude. "Thanks, you two. I don't know what I'd do without you."

She lay down, her body sinking into the bed's soft embrace. Closing her eyes, she focused inward, where within her core, a spark of potential waited, vibrant and alive.

As her mind reached out, tentatively brushing against that spark, a sudden rush of energy surged through her. It was like the first touch of a storm, electric and exhilarating. Her heart raced, and a tingling sensation spread from her core to the tips of her fingers and toes.

The world around her seemed to fade, the sounds of Mariel and Nemura's breathing, the creaks of the inn, the distant night noises—all slipping away into an abyss of nothingness. Her consciousness teetered on the edge of reality, held only by the thinnest of threads.

As her mind finally touched the core, a brilliant light enveloped her senses.

And then, just as suddenly as it had begun, everything went dark. Sloane's consciousness slipped away, leaving her physical form behind, motionless and serene, under the watchful eyes of her family.



With a deep, shuddering breath, Gwyn's eyes fluttered open in the dim moonlight filtering through her window. She lay on her back, frozen for a moment as she registered a weight across her chest and soft, rhythmic snoring close to her ear.

The warm breath ghosting over her neck sent shivers down her spine, and realization dawned with a jolt. Roslyn was snuggled up beside her, her arm draped protectively across Gwyn's chest, her head nestled comfortably in the crook of Gwyn's neck.

A fierce blush crept across her cheeks while her heart fluttered erratically.

Oh my goodness, what is...

“Gwyn...” came a sleepy murmur, barely audible.

Gwyn held her breath, her pulse quickening.

Is she talking in her sleep?

The mumbles continued, forming words soft but clear. “Go back to sleep. I’m here...”

“Are you?” Gwyn’s whisper barely disturbed the still air.

“Mhm. Never leaving.”

Oh she’s definitely awake... then... why..?

“Roz, are you awake?” Gwyn ventured cautiously.

A sleepy hum was her response.

The arm around her tightened, and Gwyn craned her neck to find Roz’s eyes still closed.

“Roz, something new happened with Mana,” Gwyn ventured, her voice a mix of excitement and uncertainty.

Her friend’s eyes flickered open, alertness piercing through the grogginess. “What happened?”

Gwyn smiled. “It said something about ‘path advancement available.’”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. I think it’s waiting for me to respond though.”

“Are you going to do it?”

“I think so? Should I?”

Roz hesitated, but she did not move from Gwyn’s side. Her arm was still squeezing her tightly and her entire body leaning close to her.

Something was wrong.

“Roslyn?”

Her bestie’s head jerked back. “What?”

“Are you okay?”

Roz sucked in a breath and Gwyn knew something was bothering her. Nevermind that her best friend had been clutching to her and snuggling her, not that Gwyn minded.

That’s what best friends did.

Then the elven heiress let out her breath and leaned back against Gwyn and lightly traced a circle over Gwyn's belly. It was... something that Roz had never done before.

Her cheeks warmed up again and even [**Cryomancy**] wouldn't save her here.

"No. I'm really not. Tonight... our adventure? It was amazing. It really was... but I got so scared. Those vines..."

She sniffled. Gwyn rolled over and put her own arm around her friend, she could feel her friend's breath on her lips.

They were so close...

"Roz? I will never, ever let anything happen to you. I will protect you. Always."

Amethyst met sapphire and in those eyes Gwyn saw something so pure and beautiful.

"Do you promise?" came the whisper in reply.

Gwyn nodded, and in doing so felt their noses brush together. "I swear."

"But what if I want to protect you? You've..." Roz sighed and warm air blew in Gwyn's face making her twitch her lips as it tickled. "You need it Gwyn. I mean this in the nicest way, but you are absolutely terrible at fitting in with nobility. You certainly try... but your magic isn't the answer to everything."

Gwyn closed her eyes and leaned forward, leaning her forehead on Roz's. "I know. I just get so... angry."

"I understand. It took me a bit, but I do now. So let me handle it for you. I know I shouldn't... I know it's pushing our Houses closer together in a way that may make grandfather angry... but I don't care. I will put your interests first, and make sure to not let anyone take advantage of you. Let me help you. But, please talk to me when you get angry and I will be there. Always."

"Promise?" Gwyn's voice was barely above a whisper, a vulnerable thread connecting her to Roz in the darkness.

"I swear," Roz echoed Gwyn's own reply, her tone imbued with a solemnity that sent a shiver through Gwyn's being. "You're not getting rid of me that easily, my knight."

Gwyn sniffled even as a smile formed on her lips. "Then I need to get stronger so I can protect you, milady." She sighed. Things would change from this. It had been bad before, but this... "They will come after you. Just like me."

"I know," Roz's voice held a quiet determination. "And I'll work on my magic too. We'll face this together."

Gwyn pulled back slightly, her eyes meeting Roz's in the moonlit room. Roz's expression was a mix of worry and resolve, a silent vow etched in the lines of her face. Gwyn couldn't help but be captivated by the depth of emotion she saw there, a reflection of their shared journey.

She's always been there, right by my side.

She means the world to me.

With a gentle mental nudge, Gwyn anchored her thoughts, fortifying her resolve. She couldn't afford to be distracted now, not with so much at stake.

"Then I need to do this advancement," Gwyn stated, a newfound determination in her voice. "It's calling to me."

Roz tilted her head, her eyes searching Gwyn's face. "Should we involve Taenya, Sabina, or Amari?"

Gwyn shook her head, her gaze fixed on Roz's thoughtful expression, finding an inexplicable comfort in the familiar furrow of her brow. She could see Roz biting her lip as she thought about it and Gwyn found she couldn't look away.

It was so...

Focus, Gwyn. This is important.

She [**Focused**] and everything was clearer.

"No. I need to do this right now. I don't know why, but I feel it," Gwyn resolved. "But with you by my side."

The hug that followed was a balm to Gwyn's troubled heart. Roz's arms wrapped around her in a gesture that spoke louder than words, offering support and unyielding loyalty.

"Be careful, Firebug," Roz murmured, her voice laced with concern and affection. "I'm right here with you."

"Hold me while I do this? I don't know what's going to happen." The words slipped out of Gwyn, her voice tinged with a vulnerability she didn't fully understand. She was a bit scared, but the feeling of her friend holding her... it would help her.

"Always," Roz whispered. "I... No, I mean... Gwyn?" She paused, but it was clear she expected no response before she continued, "You're my dearest friend. Please be safe. I'd be very cross if you hurt yourself again."

Then, before Gwyn could say a word, Roz leaned closer.

Oxylus

The moment stretched, fragile and significant. Gwyn's heart seemed to pause, waiting as Roz's breath, warm and soft, brushed against her skin. And then, with a tenderness that spoke volumes, Roz pressed a gentle kiss to Gwyn's forehead.

It was a simple gesture, yet it reverberated through Gwyn's being with an intensity that left her breathless. In that fleeting contact, a world of unspoken emotions were conveyed—a promise, a comfort, a silent acknowledgment of the depth of their bond. The kiss was soft, barely more than a whisper against her skin, but it imprinted on Gwyn's soul, leaving an echo that resonated long after the touch had faded.

Then Roz whispered into her ear, "You're... you're my heart. I can't bear the thought of you getting hurt. Now, do your thing, Firebug. Change the world again with your magic."

Gwyn couldn't speak, so all she did was nod.

Then she closed her eyes, turning inward to the wellspring of her magic, following its melody to her core. There, amidst the swirling hues of her mana, was a spark of potential, singing a silent promise of growth and strength.

Without hesitation, Gwyn reached out mentally, touching the spark. A brilliant flash of white light engulfed her mind, a surge of energy that swept her into an otherworldly void. The last tether to reality was the warmth of Roz's arms, a reminder that she was not alone in this journey into the unknown.



As Sloane opened her eyes, she found herself once again in the surreal expanse of glowing, colorful mist where she had previously connected with Vesper and Tiberius. Standing alone in this... dreamscape, her feet seemed to rest upon nothing but the inky blackness that stretched endlessly beneath her.

"Hello?" she called out, her voice echoing into nothingness.

The void did not respond.

Yet, her words seemed to dissolve into the vastness, met only by silence.

What do I do now?

Drawing from her past experiences, Sloane figured that, like before, she needed to find a core.

This time, however, it was likely to be her own.

Cause that's not weird or anything.

Just find your core, Slo. May as well find your fucking soul while we're at it.

Manabound - Resilience

Sloane shook her head before looking around, her eyes searching for any sign of a light or feeling that could hint at her core.

But the absence of any glowing beacon left her with no clear direction. With a shrug that belied her inner tension, Sloane chose a direction at random and began to move.

As she walked, the ambient mists of mana swirled and shifted around her. They danced with an ethereal grace, blending hues of blue, red, and yellow in a continuous, fluid motion. This display of mana's raw beauty was captivating, yet Sloane did not want to waste time no matter how... safe she felt.

The void was a strange place, both vast and intimate, where time and space seemed irrelevant. She felt both incredibly small and immensely powerful within this realm. Every step felt like a journey and a discovery, the mist parting and swirling in response to her movements.

Then, as she continued slicing through the mists, she caught sight of a figure in the distance. It was vague and indistinct, yet unmistakably there.

A flicker of hope sparked within Sloane.

Followed quickly by a bit of unease.

“Hello? Is someone there?” she called again, her voice stronger this time, cutting through the silence with a mix of hope and apprehension.

The figure remained silent, but it grew closer.

“Who are you?”



Gwyn wandered through a strange mist that shimmered with all the hues of her mana, each color dancing and intertwining like an otherworldly ballet. Where there wasn't the misty mana, an abyss of impenetrable blackness yawned.

Instinctively, she knew that she should probably be afraid of where she was, that her heart should probably be racing with some primal dread of the unknown.

But why isn't it? Why...

There was no fear.

Instead, a sense of profound safety enveloped her. Like snuggling up in a blanket like a burrito with her mom.

Like being close and held by Roslyn.

Why isn't this scary though? Why does it feel so... safe?

Oxylus

The thoughts swirled in her mind while the mist did the same around her.

Still, she'd learned a lot about not rushing into things. She kept her steps measured, a soft cadence in the silence of the void where each footfall seemed to ripple through the very essence of the mist.

Then, slicing through the tranquility, a voice called out.

It was a sound so deeply ingrained in her memories, so intimately connected to her heart, that recognition was immediate.

"Hello? I asked who you were?"

She looked toward the source and saw a silhouette in the distance.

Gwyn's breath hitched.

The voice, tender and yet powerful... It could only be one person.

"Mamma?" she whispered into the voice, her voice trembling with a mix of hope and uncertainty.

There was no response, just the echo of her own voice fading into the ether.

"Mamma!?" she called out again, louder, her voice laced with a growing desperation.

The colors around her seemed to pulse in response, their dance growing more fervent, as if reflecting the turmoil of emotions within her.

Her strides picked up as she rushed toward the figure.



"Mamma?!"

Sloane's breath caught in her throat, her heart racing.

No, it can't be...

"Mamma?" The voice, so familiar yet impossibly distant, echoed through the swirling mists, tugging at her very soul.

"Gwyn?!" Sloane called out, desperation lacing her voice.

She surged forward, each step driven by desperation and love. The figure ahead grew clearer, but it was not the small, familiar shape of her daughter. Instead, it was a taller, more imposing silhouette, one that did not match Gwyn's gentle presence.

Confusion and caution warred within Sloane.

This can't be her, how... why? What is going on?

She hesitated, but her instincts shoved her forward. “Gwyn? Is that you, baby?” Her voice quivered as the hope tried to stamp out the doubt and uncertainty.

Then, as if parting a curtain of dreams, someone emerged from the mist, and Sloane’s world ground to a halt.

Time seemed to slow, her heart pounding in her ears. The figure before her was both familiar and utterly changed. Grown.

Fierce.

Sloane stood frozen, her eyes wide with shock and disbelief. An older Gwyn stood there, so tall, so beautiful, and so filled with pain.

Her mind raced, trying to piece together the puzzle before her, to make sense of this surreal encounter in a realm that defied all logic.

“Gwyn? Is it really you?”



Gwyn stood motionless as she tried to grapple with the impossibility of what she was seeing.

How is she here?

Her mother’s figure materialized through the mist, a hesitant apparition that seemed as stunned as Gwyn felt. It became clearer until there was no denying who it was.

Her mamma took a tentative step forward, and Gwyn could sense the trepidation in her mother’s movements.

It's me! Mom, please.

Paralyzed by a maelstrom of emotions, Gwyn could do nothing but stare. Desperation clung to her, a heavy cloak that stifled her voice and anchored her feet. *She doesn't recognize me. No, mom. It's me. Please.*

“Mamma?” The word finally escaped her lips, a fragile croak laden with years of longing and tears.

“Oh gods, Gwyn!” Her mother’s voice cracked, a cascade of recognition and disbelief.

The dam broke within Gwyn, and a tidal wave of pent-up emotions surged forth. “Mamma, it’s you. It’s really you.” The words tumbled from her lips as she lunged forward, driven by an overwhelming need to bridge that chasm of years and sorrow that separated them.

Oxylus

But as they neared each other, an invisible barrier halted their approach. A force unseen, yet physical stopping them just shy of an embrace. Gwyn's mother's eyes widened, mirroring Gwyn's own shock and confusion, fear flickering within them like a fragile flame in the wind.

For a moment, they hovered in that space, barely a meter apart yet worlds away, each caught in the grip of impossibility.



Sloane's eyes were filled with determination, her resolve unshakable despite the invisible barrier that cruelly separated her from her daughter.

"I'm going to fix this, Gwyn. Stay right there," she asserted, trying to keep her tone confident and without the desperation she felt.

Utilizing [**Artificer's Insight**], [**Mana Sight**], and [**Arcanomancy**], she desperately tried to understand and breach the unseen wall that stood between them.

Yet her spells refused to respond. She could feel the raw energy around them, a turbulent sea of mana, yet it eluded her control, slipping through her fingers like water.

In a mix of desperation and determination, Sloane shifted her focus, trying to use the ambient mana to force her way through the barrier. She poured her will into the task, pushing against the unseen wall with all the strength her mind and spirit could muster. The barrier remained stubbornly impenetrable, a silent, invisible adversary mocking her efforts.

Refusing to give up, Sloane examined the barrier with her [**Mana Sight**], hoping to find a weakness or an end to this obstruction. To her dismay, the barrier stretched endlessly in both directions, a vertical plane of separation that seemed to go on forever.

Her heart raced, a sense of urgency fueling her actions.

Sloane tried moving up and down, her gaze piercing through the layers of magical energy, searching for any sign of a break or a flaw in the barrier. But it was to no avail. The barrier was absolute, its reach seemingly boundless, extending as far as her enhanced vision could perceive.

The situation was dire, and Sloane felt a twinge of despair creeping into her heart. The realization that she couldn't break through, that her magic was worthless in this moment, was a bitter pill to swallow.

Come on! Fuck! Let me through!

Yet, even as her mind raced to find a solution, her eyes never left Gwyn for more than a moment. The sight of her daughter, so close yet so far, filled her with a mix of sorrow and determination.

That was when she realized that over on her side, Gwyn was not idle either.

A rush of mana so strong that it felt like it would have overwhelmed Sloane emanated from her daughter like a waterfall of power.

Sloane watched as the mana around them began to warp and distort, the very fabric of this place straining under the influence of Gwyn's efforts. It was as if reality itself was attempting to contort, to reshape under the will of her daughter's immense power. The air shimmered with energy, vibrating with the potential of the magic at play.

Gwyn's eyes became a kaleidoscope of shifting colors, each hue representing a different aspect of her burgeoning power. Red flared with fiery intensity, followed by the calming depths of blue. Then, a stark blackness like the void of space, and finally a bright yellow, each color twisting mana and reality in unique and unfathomable ways.

She has four... holy shit.

The very realm *shivered* as her daughter tried everything she could to break the barrier. In the distance, the mists started moving.

Yet, for all the raw power on display, nothing seemed to work. The barrier remained, an impassable wall that defied every attempt Gwyn made to breach it. Sloane could see the frustration building in her daughter, a growing sense of helplessness that mirrored her own.

Finally, Gwyn's structured attempts gave way to pure emotion.

Blasts of *something* that looked like spatial distortions slammed into the barrier over and over, followed by the mist being *yanked* and thrown at it like a physical thing.

When that didn't work... she began to pound against the barrier with her fists, a futile gesture born of desperation.

"Gwyn. Stop, baby. Stop," she tried calling out.

Gwyn's tears flowed freely, streaming down her face as she continued to hit the invisible wall that separated them. Each thud of her fists was a heartbreaking echo in the void, a testament to their shared plight.

"Mom, I can't get through it. I can't... Mamma... please. I need you," Gwyn sobbed, her voice cracking with emotion. "It's so... it's been so hard."

"Gwyn, baby, focus. I need you to talk to me. Where are you? How are you here?" Sloane urged, her voice aching at the sight of her daughter's distress.

Gwyn's response was punctuated by hiccups. "I... I had a path advancement."

Sloane's breath hitched. *She's at step sixty-four too? Oh, my baby.* The pride she felt was immense, yet tinged with concern. *What has she gone through?*

"I'm so proud of you, sweetheart. Where are you?"

Gwyn's eyes darted around, as if seeking some answer in her surroundings.

"I mean when you were awake, sweetie. Are you safe?"

Her daughter's gaze returned to Sloane, her beautiful sapphire eyes tinged with redness and tears. Oh how she wished she could wipe those away and hold her, to comfort her as she should. She'd missed so much. There was a maturity in her eyes, a depth that gave Sloane both relief and sadness.

"I'm in my bed at the estate. Roz is holding me, keeping me safe."

"Roz?" Sloane queried, unable to keep the curiosity out of her tone.

A fierce blush crept onto Gwyn's cheeks, her smile blooming like a flower in spring. "Roslyn's my best friend. She's an elf and she's amazing, I can't wait for you to meet her! Oh, my gods, mom. I have so much magic, and so does Roz, and we had an adventure tonight... and... and..."

Sloane's heart swelled with both joy and sorrow. *Oh, baby. Your first... And I'm not there...*

Then, a shadow of realization crossed her mind.

I'm not there... I haven't been there and she's found her first... Oh, gods, I missed so much...

She gave her daughter a soft smile. "I can't wait to meet her, sweetheart."

Her daughter looked up at her in confusion, but then the mist around them began to churn more violently, a harbinger of their time running short.

Sloane's eyes widened as she took in their surroundings before snapping back on the burgeoning young woman in front of her.

"Tell me, are you safe? Gwyn, *sei al sicuro?*" she asked, her voice edged with urgency.

Gwyn's expression shifted to one of pain, sending a stab of fear through Sloane's heart. "*Si, Mamma.* For now. But people want to hurt us. I have my people to keep safe. They keep trying to hurt us, mamma. I have to fight them, and I have to keep Roz safe now too. I won't let them hurt her, I won't. I'll... I'll..."

Her daughter choked down a sob that almost broke Sloane's heart.

The storm of mana started blowing faster and the two of them found themselves having to speak louder and louder so that they could hear each other.

"How long until you're here, mamma? Where are you?"

The image of Gwyn, tears streaming down her face, was a dagger in Sloane's heart. The mist kept swirling faster, the tendrils of fog thickening as Gwyn's form began to blur and fade.

"We're in Rosale, heading toward the capital," Sloane rushed to explain, her words tumbling out. "We're going to find a ship to come to Avira. I'm so sorry for all the delays. We're doing everything we can to get to you. Are you still at the Academy in the capital?"

Her daughter's form was fading, and she could barely hear what she was saying.

"Gwyn? Can you hear me?" Sloane called out, desperation starting to fill her. She needed to know her daughter heard her, to assure her that she was coming, no matter what.

Mana and power surged from her daughter, as if she was defying the very heavens, and her form came back, Gwyn was panting, sweating but she forced herself to be heard. "I hear you! Please hurry, mamma. I'm scared. There's so much happening here, everything's closing in."

Sloane's heart ached, a maelstrom of emotions threatening to overwhelm her. "I will, baby. I promise, I'm coming as fast as I can. Just stay strong, Gwyn. You're so brave. So powerful. You can handle this. I believe in you. Keep those you trust close."

Gwyn's image started fading again, but her daughter, now a young woman, managed a small brave smile, her eyes shining through the tears. "I'll try, Mamma. I miss you so much. Be safe, okay? Don't get hurt."

"I won't, Gwynnie. I'll be there before you know it." Sloane reached out, but her hand just hit the barrier. "I love you. So much."

"I love you too, Mamma." Gwyn's voice was barely a whisper now, the mist swallowing her form.



"Mamma? I forgot to tell you! Go through the Duchy of Tiloral!" she screamed, her plea attempting to pierce through the mist, but it was as if the sound dissolved into nothingness, as if the very air refused to carry her message.

Her mamma's form flickered, a waning image caught in the ebb and flow of the mist. "...Gwyn! ...I'll ... sister!... Coming!" The words were fragmented, as if she was trying to force them through by mana itself.

Sister?

Gwyn drew mana into her core and shoved it to her voice and *yelled*, “**Mom! Look for Count Siveril! He’ll help you!**” She clung to the hope that her message would reach her mother, and somehow, amidst the swirling chaos that her voice would be heard.

But her mother’s figure continued to fade, becoming more ethereal, more distant with each passing second.

Gwyn strained to see, to connect, to somehow transcend the barrier that separated them, but the mist claimed her mother’s form, swallowing her presence.

Until it was gone.

“Mamma...”

Silence descended like a heavy, oppressive blanket that smothered the remnants of Gwyn’s cries. She stood alone in the mist, her heart aching with the weight of unspoken words and unanswered pleas. The moment had passed, a fleeting chance slipped through her fingers like grains of sand.

Then, as the weight of everything that had just happened finally slammed into her, Gwyn fell to her knees and sobbed.

She stayed like that for who knows how long, sitting in a void and surrounded by mana, staring at the spot where her mom had been. Hoping that she’d come back.

She didn’t.

But eventually...

Someone else did.

“Gwyn,” a voice came from behind her.

She whirled around, her heart skipping a beat at the unexpected presence.

The figure before her was both familiar and disappointing—it was herself, not her mother, and not as she was now. It was her older self, the one she had seen in the Vision of Potential, standing with an air of authority and wisdom that Gwyn had yet to attain.

It was like a punch to the gut.

The encounter left Gwyn momentarily speechless, her mind racing to make sense of yet another impossible meeting. Something that raised more questions than it answered.

“Why are you here?” Gwyn managed to ask after what seemed like an eternity

“I’m here... because it is time to decide your path. I am here to—”

“Where’s my mother? Why did you take her away?”

The figure, herself and not, tilted her head before looking beyond Gwyn, at where the barrier had been.

“Interesting. That... I will need to contemplate this. But no matter... Come.”

Her older self turned around, and despite Gwyn trying to get more out of her, the figure just kept walking. Stifling a scream of frustration, she hurried to catch up and see what the *hell* was going on.



She wasn't sure how long she stood there, looking at the spot where Gwyn had faded away from, but Sloane held onto hope that her daughter would return.

Her breath caught in her throat as a figure started to materialize into existence in front of her.

“Gwyn?!” she called out, filled with hope.

A woman appeared in front of her.

But it wasn't Gwyn.

It wasn't her little girl that was growing up and not with her. Her little girl who was still hundreds of kilometers away having to fight for her life.

“Sloane,” the woman in front of herself said.

The heartbroken mother tilted her head as she finally realized who it was in front of her.

Before her stood a version of herself, but with nuances that set them apart. The other-Sloane's eyes shimmered with a kaleidoscope of mana, reflecting the spectrum within Sloane's core. Her hair was styled in a meticulous bun, revealing ears adorned with piercings that Sloane wanted to get with Mariel. Draped in black robes, she exuded a sense of ease and composure in a way that Sloane hadn't since arriving in Eona.

“Who are you?” Sloane asked.

The other-Sloane tilted her head, a gesture both familiar and strange. “I am you, yet I am also more,” she answered, her gaze drifting to where the barrier and Gwyn had been. “That encounter was unintended. An oversight... no, no matter. Your meeting was my mistake but one that became your boon, one that shall not repeat.”

“That was really Gwyn then? Not something I made up in my mind? It felt true... but...” Sloane pressed, seeking affirmation.

The other-Sloane held her gaze, a silent understanding passing between them, before finally nodding. “Indeed. Your daughter is an utterly unique being, one treasured soul who is to be cherished. The meeting was as much her doing as my lapse. Both of you have surpassed my expectations, though others are closing in.”

Gwyn is to be cherished? I mean of course, but...

“I can hear your thoughts. I will not speak more on the matter. I cannot.”

Sloane scowled.

“Who are you?” Sloane repeated slowly.

The other-Sloane motioned for her to follow. “Let us walk and talk. Your maturity and comprehension of this place makes things simple, unlike with your daughter. Gwyneth possesses a stubbornness that makes her inner journey more challenging.”

Sloane snorted at that. *Gwyn? Stubborn? Say it isn't so.*

As they walked, the endless void transformed into a cobblestone path, bordered by grass that faded into the encompassing mist. “Where are we?” Sloane inquired, her eyes wide with wonder.

“In your soul, your Inner Self, linked to Me. I am but a fragment, a conscious sliver of a sliver of a sliver connected to the world's core. Here, I appear as an aspect of you,” the other-Sloane explained.

Sloane's mind raced, piecing together the puzzle. “You're the Intent. The Intent of Mana.”

A smile graced the other-Sloane's lips. “In a manner of speaking, yes. I am part of the world's core, and simultaneously, I am part of you; made up mostly from your own soul to bridge the gap. I am here to guide you in choosing your path. And I speak not of the path that will reunite you with Gwyneth. I speak of your personal path, that of creation and discovery. Of magic and metal and their myriad combinations.”

The path wove its way through the mist, leading them to an awe-inspiring structure, an architectural marvel that defied the limits of Sloane's imagination. The building loomed like a grand old train station, its towering facade resplendent with ornate carvings and shimmering with an ethereal glow. Arched windows adorned its walls, each pane a kaleidoscope of colored glass that cast dancing lights upon the cobblestones even without sunlight.

As they approached, the grand double doors swung open silently, revealing an interior that stretched beyond the bounds of normal perception. The vast hall was a convergence of innumerable pathways, each representing a potential future. Rail lines of glowing mana intersected with floating bridges, while tunnels burrowed into unknown realms, their entrances framed by glowing runes.

But the most captivating fixture was in the center of this magnificent hall.

Dominating the space with its presence was a colossal core. This heart of Sloane's inner world swirled with vibrant mana, a mesmerizing vortex of blue, red, and yellow energies. It pulsed rhythmically, like a heartbeat, its luminous waves casting ethereal light across the hall and illuminating the paths that radiated out from it. The core's presence was both awe-inspiring and humbling, a visual representation of Sloane's own power and potential, its vibrant colors mirroring the essence of her magic.

Around the massive core the air thrummed with energy, charged with the raw potential of Sloane's magical capabilities. The colors of the core bled into the pathways, tinting them with shades of her attuned mana types in ways she couldn't explain.

The ceiling soared above, lost in a canopy of star-like lights that shimmered against a backdrop of cosmic darkness. The air was alive with the hum of magic, a symphony of possibilities that resonated through the very fabric of the place.

Amidst this expanse of choices, Sloane's breath caught in her throat.

Paths of light intertwined with shadowy alleys, each beckoning with promises of untold destinies. The air around her thrummed with the power of uncharted paths, an overwhelming tapestry of what could be.

As her eyes tried to follow the infinite intersections and diverging routes, the sheer scale of choices seemed to multiply exponentially. The paths overlapped, intertwined, and stretched into infinity, blurring into a relentless, never-ending maze of possibilities.

Oh, fuck.

A wave of nausea surged through Sloane, her stomach knotting in response to the sensory overload. Her head spun, a disorienting whirl of lights and shadows that threatened to sweep her off her feet. It felt as if the ground beneath her was tilting, the world itself spinning uncontrollably in a dance of potential and power.

But then, the comforting touch of the other-Sloane brought a sense of clarity. The dizzying array of options coalesced, narrowing down to ten distinct pathways. Each was unique, some aglow with vibrant hues, others shrouded in mystery, but all equally compelling.

"Now, Sloane, as you can see there are a few options," she said with a wink that made Sloane roll her eyes. "But I feel these are a good start. Let us together decide our path," the other-Sloane repeated, her voice resonating with a deep wisdom and a sense of shared destiny. She gestured towards the paths, each one a gateway to a future ripe with potential and fraught with challenges.



Gwyn trailed her future self, the Archmage of Discovery, along a winding path that led toward a distant wall, its details shrouded in the encompassing mist.

“Where are we heading?” Gwyn inquired for what had to have been like the tenth time.

Her older self offered a knowing smile but no further clues. “You’ll see.”

“And you won’t tell me anything else about my mom?”

“I’ve told you all I can,” the Archmage replied, a touch of firmness in her voice.

Gwyn couldn’t help but feel a sting of frustration. “You don’t have to be a jerk about it. You said we were the same, in that Vision of Potential. So you should know how I feel.”

“Yes, Gwyneth, we are the same in essence. But remember, I am also intertwined with the core of this world.”

Gwyn sighed. “So, in other words, you’re *more* than a bit of a jerk. A planet sized jerk.”

Her older self’s response was calm, even empathetic. “Your anger is natural. But look, we’ve arrived.”

Indeed, they had.

The gate of the towering stone wall before them swung open, and the enveloping mist receded to unveil a structure that took Gwyn’s breath away.

It was a tower, reminiscent of the one from her vision, yet this one soared into the heavens, its peak lost to the clouds above. Its grandeur was such that it seemed endless, a pillar connecting earth and stars above.

Is it going into space?! Oh man, can I go into space? Will I be weightless?

She frowned. Her emotions were not as messed up as she would expect.

Gwyn glanced at the Archmage, who observed her reaction with a serene gaze. She narrowed her eyes. “I hope this place has elevators,” Gwyn quipped.

Her future self burst into laughter, clearly not expecting such a comment. “Fear not, we won’t be scaling the stairs.”

Gwyn raised an eyebrow. “But there are stairs, right? Good to know for fire safety. After all, you know us.” She said the last part with a conspiratorial wink.

Rolling her eyes, the Archmage gestured toward the tower. “Inside, each level presents types of paths for your journey. It’s time for you to choose your course.”

Gazing upwards, Gwyn felt a sense of awe mixed with determination. “Looks like we’ll be spending quite some time here.”

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“I have selected ten paths that are the most ideal fit for you to guide your decision-making. I suspect it will be from one of these that you decide where you go from here. If not, we can refine as needed.”

“Is archmage one of them?” Gwyn mused, a hint of admiration in her voice.

Her older self chuckled, leading the way to the tower's entrance. “You are still at the early stages of your journey to Archmage status, young Gwyneth.”

“True. Refinement four, if I remember right from the vision.”

The pride in her doppelganger's expression was unmistakable. “Exactly so.”

“Tell me... is it all the princess training that makes me sound so stuck up in the future? Or is that a requirement to work here? I need to make Roz promise to smack me if I sound like you when we're older.”

Archmage Gwyneth the Old sighed but did not respond.

Gwyn the Young and Beautiful took that as a victory.

Approaching the tower, Gwyn noticed the elaborate carvings on the double doors—scenes that depicted her life since arriving on Eona, her challenges and her triumphs. It was a surreal moment, standing before a gateway that seemed to tell her own story.

She shrugged off the overwhelming sensation. “Alright, let's see these choices you've laid out. They better be good, or I might just have to give you a piece of my mind.”

“I believe you'll find them more than satisfactory,” her older self assured her.

Gwyn couldn't help but acknowledge the calming effect the tower had on her. “I've been around Sabina enough to know that you're using some sort of emotional manipulation here. I need to get through this quickly so I can get back to Roz for a good cry. It wasn't fair, you know, showing me my mom and then pulling her away before we could really talk.”

The Archmage placed a reassuring hand on Gwyn's shoulder, a gesture of understanding and solidarity. Gwyn looked at the hand, the urge to push it away wrestling with her need for comfort. Ultimately, she exhaled deeply and stepped forward into the tower, her resolve firm.

She was here to grow stronger, to prepare for her mom. To keep Roz safe. The journey ahead was a bit daunting, but Gwyn was ready to face whatever lay within.