

# Interlude

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## A Desire for Connection

Mariel took a deep breath as she centered herself. She felt... great. The last few weeks had been the best of her life, and they were getting better by the day.

It was so liberating. So amazing. People actually cared for *her*. Not for the priestess-in-training who had unusual magic. Who needed to go to a holy order in Calling that would determine whether she was affected by dark gods.

She felt herself quiver. Her doubts seeped into her like a darkness that was worse than even her black mana.

But she wasn't allowed to tell Sloane that. Mariel wasn't allowed to say that she was scared that they would claim she was a heretic—a cultist.

Both protocol and the High Priest had made it clear she at least needed to undergo the rights. Even the normally stoic Shalas had become fearful once whispers of her being an avatar started floating around. However, the paladin had constantly reassured her that all would be fine and that her magic could be used for good. The Praetor was a good woman, and very kind... but it didn't do anything to quell Mariel's fear.

Only Sloane had done that.

Guilt had wracked her ever since her worthlessness in Swanbrook. It ate at her, grated upon her very soul. But Tenera wouldn't want her to dwell on her failings. She would want Mariel to change her outlook and force herself to become strong.

She shoved the darkness away.

No, Mariel needed to work. She had to prove to Sloane that having her around was better than sending her away. She'd prove herself.

Mainly because with Sloane, Nemura, and Stefan, she felt like she didn't need to hide herself. She could just be... Mariel. It was the happiest she'd ever been.

A small part of her readily accepted just how starved for affection she was. Her parents whose faces she couldn't even remember had long given her away to the Church. A life that had seen her sequestered in constant lessons—training for all that was required to become a priestess.

## Manabound - Resilience

But she didn't focus on that. She'd found someone who truly cared about her, and she never wanted them to leave. Even if Mariel would be considered an adult in just two years, she wanted what Gwyn had.

A mother.

One who would overcome any obstacle to find her daughter. Whose love was unconditional and would never give her up. Who would help her, teach her, and love her forever.

She just had to prove that she could be helpful. To show Sloane that she was worth it.

A quick look at her dimly lit room, she glanced outside seeing the telltale signs of the sun rising and little flakes of white flurrying. *Oh, hey! It's snowing! Wait... That can come later.* She didn't have much time.

She clapped her cheeks. "Alright, let's do this!"

Mariel [**Focused**].

She'd gained the trait after Sloane had pushed her to practice her magic. Another reason the baroness was so amazing. In fact, Mariel had learned it the same day Sloane had painfully figured out the spell limit. After, the trait became an essential tool for Mariel to practice with.

Which led to her improving by leaps and bounds.

Mariel took a deep breath, recalling the lessons Sloane had imparted. She channeled mana through her core, feeling it dance and weave through her being, a sensation both invigorating and grounding. The bones, her constant companions, lay scattered around her, not as tools for this particular task, but as mentors. They were her touchstone, her guide for her magic.

She centered her thoughts on the bones, using the familiar form of the [**Bone Splinters**] spell as her foundation. With a determined exhale, she extended a hand, fingers splayed, towards the ground. Drawing upon her [**Telekinesis**], a trait she had painstakingly learned after observing Sloane use it, she managed to lift a few bones into the air, albeit with a slight tremor.

The air grew thick with tension as black mana, pulsating with her intent, latched onto a particular bone fragment—a small piece of a cat's humerus. With the fragment as her muse, the black mana flooded and enveloped it, causing it to expand and transform. Before her eyes, the small bone elongated and thickened, evolving into a magnificent spear. The spear's shaft was sleek and polished, its surface gleaming with an ethereal luster. The tip was razor-sharp, tapering to a deadly point, and the entire weapon seemed to hum with latent energy as a black shadowy fog appeared as if it were emanating from the head itself.

The device on her wrist vibrated as she felt a rush of what Aila had termed *essentia surge* through her body.

## Oxylus

With a triumphant grin, Mariel reached out, her fingers wrapping around the spear's shaft as the spell's energy dissipated. *I did it!* she thought, her heart racing with excitement. The weight of the spear in her hand felt right. The height was perfect.

She lifted it up and pointed forward, then using her **[Telekinesis]**, she launched it forward.

It fell with a loud clank onto the floor after going only halfway across the room.

Her enthusiasm fell.

*Damn it!*

Maybe she could cast it in the same way she did **[Bone Splinters]**. That meant she had to use her **[Telekinesis]** as it was forming, and her magic would do the rest.

She sighed, letting go of her magic and letting the spear fall apart and return to fragments of bone. Looking down at the excerpt reader that mo-Sloane had made her... Mariel winced.

*I can't mess that up again. Be careful. Not forceful. She cares, but I can't try and force her to love me. Hopeful not desperate.*

With a nod, she tapped the rune that would bring up the notifications.

**[Spell – Bone Spear created!]**

**[Acolyte – Step 30 attained!]**

Mariel's eyes darted over the notifications, her lips pressed into a thin line. It was progress, certainly, but not the leap she was aiming for. The hunger for more, for mastery, gnawed at her like a wolf with a bone. She took a deep breath, steadying herself. *One more spell. Just one more,* she urged herself.

Harnessing her **[Focus]**, she delved into her **[Necromancy]** trait, allowing the arcane energies to course through her. Her **[Telekinesis]** acted as the conduit, bridging her intent with the tangible world and the bones at her feet. As black and yellow mana pulsed within her, she caught a fleeting reflection of herself in the nearby vanity. The once ice-blue of her eyes had transformed into glowing yellow irises in a sea of her now black scleras, a visual affirmation of her deep dive into her mana.

*This is it.*

With a determined exhale, she visualized protection, a barrier crafted from the very bones she commanded. Using her **[Telekinesis]**, bones lifted from the floor, hovering around her in a macabre dance. They began to draw upon the ambient mana, multiplying and reshaping. The bones intertwined and fused even as more were conjured from mana itself, forming thick plates of armor.

They wrapped around her, creating a cuirass for her torso, solid greaves encasing her legs, and vambraces shielding her arms. The helm took shape, and in the mirror she saw two cute, curved horns coming from her temples along with a narrow slit for her eyes, ensuring maximum protection while allowing her to see.

The cuirass, wrapping snugly around her torso, bore an uncanny resemblance to a human ribcage. Each rib-like ridge was meticulously crafted, curving around her form in a protective embrace. Below this, segmented bone plates cascaded down, providing a flexible yet sturdy guard for her hips. These segments moved with her, each piece overlapping the next, allowing for both mobility and defense.

The armor's design wasn't just functional; it was intimidating. Strategic ridges and protrusions adorned the armor, giving it a predatory aura. The greaves on her legs had sharp, bone-like spines running down the sides, while the vambraces on her arms bore jagged edges but left an opening for the screen of her excerpt reader, making her limbs look like deadly weapons in their own right.

The helm, with its singular eye slit, was the most remarkable feature. It looked as if it was carved from the skull of some ancient beast, with bone ridges accentuating its fearsome design. The overall effect was both awe-inspiring and terrifying, turning Mariel into a formidable figure, a true bone-clad warrior.

With a flick of her will, **[Shadowmancy]** combined with her black mana flooded through her and she cast her **[Dark Shroud]**, encasing the armor in a shadowy mist that gave her a deadly look.

A surge of exhilaration washed over Mariel as more essentia coursed through her veins. The sensation was intoxicating, and she couldn't help but let out a giddy giggle. Riding on this newfound wave of confidence, she channeled her magic once more, this time conjuring a **[Bone Spear]** with practiced ease.

But she didn't stop there. Her **[Necromancy]** beckoned her, urging her to push her boundaries. Her eyes darted to a small piece of a sacral bone on the floor, a remnant from a cat.

Drawing upon her **[Animate Skeleton]**, she focused intently on the fragment. Slowly, bone began to conjure from black mana and connect, forming a skeletal structure that, within moments, became a fully articulated cat skeleton. The effort of conjuring so much bone instead of using what was already there brought a wave of weariness to Mariel, but her elation quickly overwhelmed it.

The creature, now animated, looked around with eyes that glowed a fiery yellow, framed by swirling black mana. It turned its hollow gaze to Mariel, and in a moment that felt suspended in time, it let out a meow. Though no sound echoed in the physical realm, Mariel, through her **[Necromancy]**, heard it clear as day. The sound was hauntingly beautiful, an ethereal melody that resonated deep within her soul.

## Oxylus

Mariel, now encased in her intricate bone armor, stood before the mirror. The reflection staring back was a formidable figure, a warrior draped in necromancy and the very essence of death. Never mind an Avatar of Tenera, she was the personification of Relena, the Goddess of Death, Herself.

She took in her appearance in the mirror and... giggled.

Mariel glanced down at her reader, and felt a bit better as she skipped the notifications to navigate straight to see her excerpt on the screen.

### **Mariel Lunaris**

***“The Studios”***

**Raithe**

**Path:** Acolyte (Mage)

**Steps:** 32

**Core Quality:** Remarkable

**Affinity:** Abjuration, Conjunction

**Attunement:** Black, Yellow

**Alignment:** Magical

**Primary Attribute:** Control

**Secondary Attribute:** Capability

**Traits:** Mana Sense, Sense Unlife, Shadowmancy, Necromancy, Focus, Telekinesis

**Passive Spells:** Dark Shroud, Bone Armor

**Active Spells:** Mend Bone, Animate Skeleton, Bone Splinters, Bone Spear

She mentally tallied her progress. Four steps and two new spells in just one day. *Not bad, Mar. Not bad at all.*

Her moment of self-congratulation was interrupted by a knock on the door. Panic surged through her. The Necromancer, the Acolyte of Death, the summoner of skeletal kittens, was supposed to be in bed. She wasn't prepared for an audience.

*Oh, Tenera. This isn't good.*

Mariel's heart raced as she hastily dismissed her spells. The bone armor clattered to the floor, disassembling into individual plates and bits of bone, while the skeletal cat crumbled into a disjointed heap. Another knock echoed through the room, prompting her to use her [**Telekinesis**] to hurriedly sweep the bone remnants beneath her bed.

With swift movements, she leaped into bed, yanking the covers up to her chin. Her eyes darted to the oil lamp on her desk, and with a thought, she invoked her **[Shadowmancy]**. The flame, instead of extinguishing, was shrouded in an inky blackness, plunging the room into near-total darkness, save for the faint glow of dawn filtering through the window.

The door creaked open.

“Mistress Mariel?”

Feigning drowsiness, Mariel stretched and yawned, fluttering her eyes open. “Y-Yes? I’m awake.”

A sun elf maid entered holding a lamp. Her gaze settled on the obscured flame of Mariel’s lamp. She sighed, a mix of exasperation and fondness. “Mistress, your magic doesn’t extinguish the flame, it merely conceals it momentarily. How late were you practicing this time?”

Mariel bit her lip, guilt evident in her eyes. “I don’t know... quite a while.”

The maid mumbled something about ‘the energy of youth’ and set her lamp on the vanity, casting a gentle glow across the room. “You should rest more, mistress. A young lady like you needs her sleep. It’s essential for your well-being.” Her gaze returned to the still-blackened flame.

Mariel, sensing the unspoken but polite reprimand, released her **[Shadowmancy]**, allowing the flame to regain its natural light.

The maid shook her head, a hint of amusement in her eyes. “By Alos, you truly are a devout follower of Tenera, aren’t you? Even your magic mirrors her essence.”

Mariel beamed with pride. “Absolutely! Tenera encourages us to ever change, to better ourselves. It’s only right that my magic embodies the mysteries of the night.”

There was another mutter that Mariel caught something about how Mariel would make a perfect priestess. The sentiment sent both pride and anxiety coursing through the Acolyte.

But the maid simply chuckled softly and changed the subject, much to Mariel’s appreciation. “Alright, let’s prepare you for the day. But be warned, the Baroness seems... introspective today. She’s likely pondering a new project.”

Mariel’s brow furrowed in concern. She’d need to get ready quickly. If Sloane was engrossed in a new endeavor, then the Artificer would undoubtedly require the aid of her most amazing and studious assistant.

“That’s fine. It’s snowing! So that will make anyone happy. Maybe she’ll want to go outside with me before we get started on her next idea.”

And despite being a priestess-in-training and apparent Avatar of Tenera, the Goddess of Night, Mariel was eager to be that ray of sunshine in Sloane’s contemplative day.

As a prospective daughter should.



Mariel stepped out of her room, her youthful face adorned with a playful, fangy grin. The maid had been a great help in getting her dressed, and she felt a surge of gratitude. Her steps were light and springy as she made her way down the corridor past amused guards and maids. Her destination clear as day—Sloane's room.

She paused outside the doors momentarily, rapping gently on the door.

“Come in.”

With a burst of enthusiasm, Mariel swung the door open. “Sloane! Sloane! It's snowing! Let's—”

Her exuberance faltered, her smile freezing in place. Sloane sat on a plush bench by the window, her gaze distant, lost in the world outside. The lazy cat that Mariel wanted to ride like a horse lay next to her protectively. Through the window, Mariel could see the estate grounds being blanketed in the season's first snow. The trees were now adorned with white, their branches heavy and drooping. Snowflakes, delicate and intricate, continued to drift down, painting the world in a serene, almost ethereal beauty.

But the chill from the snow outside had seemingly seeped in, creating a cold atmosphere that made Mariel's heart race.

*Something's wrong.*

“Sloane?” Mariel approached cautiously, walking hesitantly as her gaze stuck onto the human. Sloane's stature always struck her—she towered over Mariel's one hundred sixty eight centimeters. The woman's tan skin, reminiscent of a telv's, contrasted sharply with Mariel's own grey hue. Sloane's cascading brown curls were a stark difference from Mariel's straight, black locks. Despite the vast difference in appearances, when Mariel looked at Sloane, the only thing she saw was a woman she deeply wished to call 'mother'.

Sloane's gaze shifted, locking onto Mariel. The intensity, the depth of that look sent a shiver down Mariel's spine. But then, Sloane's lips curved into a smile. “Good morning, Mariel. How are you?”

Mariel mustered a smile, her voice tinged with excitement. “I'm great! I got another four steps and made two new spells!” she said as she pointed down at her excerpt reader. Her second most cherished gift after the necklace she never took off.

Sloane's face genuinely brightened and it made Mariel's heart soar. Even when she was upset, she always showed pride in Mariel's achievements. It was perfect and made her just want to rush into Sloane's arms and hug her.

"That's incredible, Mariel! You have been working so hard and your dedication is commendable. I'm really proud of you," she said and Mariel beamed again as Sloane continued, "But remember, you need rest. My assistant can't be fatigued during her duties, right?"

*Of course, a mother always knows.* Mariel wouldn't expect anything less from Sloane.

But then her smile faltered as Mariel realized the slight emphasis on 'assistant', a hint of something deeper, perhaps a struggle within Sloane.

"Yeah, sorry..." She hesitated, her voice laced with concern. "Are... are you okay, Sloane?"

Sloane's smile was gentle, yet guarded. "I'm actually very good, I had some amazing news last night. But it also put me in a difficult place."

She couldn't contain her curiosity. "Really? What is it?"

Mariel's heart raced, hope surging as Sloane took a moment to think. *Could it be news from the Church again? Did the Praetor come back? Maybe I don't have to go to Calling, and I can stay with them?*

"Stefan discovered another House Reinhart."

Mariel blinked, her excitement waning. *What?* "Okay..? Why does that matter?"

Sloane's expression softened. "It means Gwyn is out there, safe. And as the actual head of a House, she's likely not in immediate trouble. Unfortunately, we're stuck... here, and I can't do anything about that."

A massive pit formed in Mariel's stomach and a heavy weight settled on her chest. She... she knew that she should be elated. Sloane's relentless quest to find Gwyn had been the driving force behind so many of their actions. Mariel herself was eager to meet the thirteen-year-old, to possibly gain a little sister.

Yet, a gnawing dread consumed her. Why did this revelation unsettle her so?

Mariel swallowed hard, her throat suddenly dry. She tried to summon that earlier enthusiasm, to be the pillar of support Sloane might need. *A good daughter would be excited for her mother, right?* "That's... that's great news, Sloane! Do you know where she is? When do we set out to find her?"

Sloane's eyes, usually so vibrant, looked weary. She offered a melancholic smile. "We don't have an exact location yet. But we do know it's not in Rosale, so once Spring arrives, we're heading to Calling."

Mariel's heart sank.



## Oxylus

The weight of disappointment pressed down on her, making it hard to breathe. “We’re... still going to Calling? But... can’t we just skip that and search for Gwyn? She’s... she’s the priority, isn’t she?”

Sloane’s gaze wavered, her eyes clouded with a mix of emotions. After a moment, she shifted and motioned to the space beside her on the bench. “Come, sit with me. I think... I think it’s time we talked about the future.”

Mariel hesitated, her feet rooted to the spot. The look on Sloane’s face was one she’d often seen in her dreams, one that sent a shiver down her spine. It was a look of resignation, of finality. It was the look of parents before they gave their children away.