

# Interlude

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## A Mother's Love

In the distance, an ear piercing shriek scattered the tranquility of the early morning. It may have even woken up the entire city block. But to her, it sounded close, possibly even another room within the very same inn. Some might surmise it was a woman's startled cry upon encountering a rodent, while others may believe it was the screech of some terrified animal.

However, beneath the muffled confines of her bedcovers, the self-proclaimed Empress of Bones, the fledgling harbinger of undeath, and a mischievous sorceress of the shadows attempted to stifle a burgeoning giggle. The satisfaction of a well-executed prank was nearly too much to bear, and her joy bubbled just beneath the surface.

But then came the dreaded sound, the unmistakable tone of authority that could only belong to one person.

Her mom cleared her throat.

“Mariel Lunaris Reinhart.”

At that moment, Mariel, the teenage—almost an adult—necromancer, monster vanquisher, and occasional prankster, cautiously peered over her blanket fortress. There she saw her mother standing with an all-too-familiar hand on her hip, her gaze piercing through Mariel like a spectral lance. The intimidating figure before her, a woman who had braved untold dangers and battled fearsome beasts, now focused that same formidable presence squarely on her daughter.

“Y-Yes, mother?” Mariel managed to squeak out.

“Don't you ‘yes, mother’ me. What in the world has Stefan howling like a banshee at dawn?”

Mariel, mustering every ounce of regal composure she could, sat up straighter and donned the facade of a dignified—albeit slightly mischievous—necromantic heiress. Surely, the indirect lineage to a genuine princess—her sister—which, despite her mom's fake queen status, lent her some credibility, right?

“Whatever do you mean, mother? Such commotions are hardly rare in a bustling inn such as this,” Mariel replied with as much nonchalance as she could muster.

A single eyebrow arched on Sloane's face—a silent, yet powerful, rebuttal. Some would even say the most dangerous weapon in the artificing baroness's arsenal.

Panic set in. *Shit. Retreat! Abort!*

“Would, of course, be something a terrible daughter would say. Not like me,” Mariel quickly added, hoping to salvage the situation.

“Uh-huh. And?” Her mom pressed on.

“Well, hypothetically speaking... would you believe it if Mister Bigglesworth simply sought some affection from Stefan? Some cuddles, perhaps?” Mariel offered.

Sloane brought her hand to her forehead, massaging her temples as if to ward off an impending headache. “Mar...”

“What?! Mister Bigglesworth deserves love and companionship too!”

“Your undead cat is devoid of any need for... snuggling, Mariel. Don’t you try and weasel your way out of this one. I’m not dealing with his antics today. You created the mess, you get to handle it.”

Mariel cocked her head to one side, her eyes twinkling with a mixture of mischief and innocence. “But hypothetically, if we were to come across the remains of a weasel, do you think Nemura—”

“Mariel!”

“Just a jest, mother. Merely jesting!” Mariel quickly interjected, her laughter bubbling up uncontrollably.

“Yeah, yeah. You need to get ready. We have a busy day.”

Mariel smiled. Oh, she knew today was going to be busy. It was *the* day. Her mom and Nell had set up an appointment with the main temple’s high priestess. Not to be confused with the high priestess of the order Mariel was *supposed* to be going to—and the one they’d met on their trip here—High Priestess Othiwen.

She got out of bed and started getting everything ready. Her mom had wanted her to dress nice, but Mariel had pushed back. Dressing like that would give off the wrong message and luckily Nell had backed her up. Mariel wanted it to be known that she was no longer some proper priestess-in-training who wore robes and such. Nell would tell them she was out there fighting monsters with her mom.

After her mom left the room to go grab them breakfast, Mariel began to dress for the day ahead. She reached first for the sleek black top, its fabric cool and smooth against her skin—definitely material that would have been too expensive before becoming a young lady. The high collar added an element of sophistication, while the reinforced seams traced her form, hinting at her readiness for any eventuality. She admired the fit in the mirror, noting how it allowed her to move freely—an essential for a necromancer who might need to conjure or duel at a moment’s notice.

Next, she pulled on her winter jacket, its sturdy yet stylish material designed for both warmth and discretion. She appreciated the cleverly hidden pockets and compartments, perfect for concealing

her tools and anything her mom may give her to use while her excerpt reader was neatly hidden under the sleeve. The bone white accents of the jacket sharply contrasted with the dark fabric, enhancing the structured design and adding a layer of elegance that she enjoyed.

She then stepped into a skirt that fell just above the knee, allowing for ease of movement while maintaining an air of refinement. Beneath it, she wore wool leggings, their snug fit providing warmth and a sleek silhouette that would keep her warm as the temperature outside continued to plummet everyday. The leggings disappeared into a pair of robust winter boots, chosen for their stability and subtle compartments—one of which concealed her trusty dagger that Stefan got her.

With a practiced hand, Mariel fastened a belt around her waist, clipping on her pouch and adjusting her satchel to sit just right. The belt's grommets were not only functional, holding her essentials close, but she felt the metal also added to the overall vibe she was going for with her looks, or as her mom called it, edgy style which she claimed fit her **[Bone Armor]** quite nicely.

Mariel wasn't sure what that meant but she liked it when she heard it.

But then her mom had laughed so hard she snorted when Mariel had said she'd rather be edgy than angsty. She'd even taken to calling Mariel 'Edgelady Bones' for a week after that, so maybe her initial thoughts may have been off.

Standing before the mirror, Mariel gave herself a final once-over. Her outfit struck the perfect balance between looking the part of a higher status young woman and the readiness of an off duty soldier. It was an ensemble fit for the aspiring greatest necromancer in the world—fiercely elegant, unyieldingly strong, and entirely her own. All it was missing was bones—not that mom would let her accent it with such art before their business at the temple.

Mariel would correct that after they completed this particular chapter of her life.

Back in Nornport, she had researched the subject of her adoption by mom a lot with Stefan. They had a plan, and a good one at that. She wished she could go into the temple and look at *their* records, because she knew there would be a lot of similar situations she could pull on.

But that of course didn't matter now. Mariel was going to stride in there and tell them what was what. She was a Reinhart, and she was going with her mom whether they liked it or not.

They could try to stop her, but she had a very good relationship with a death kitty and no, she didn't mean Mister Bigglesworth. Vesper was much more intimidating.

For now.

After making the adoption legal, mom had promised Mariel could openly practice her magic more often. Which was good, because this girl had *ideas*. And all of them would make Vesper look like a cuddly house cat by comparison. Especially when she figured out how to let her skeletons use magic.

She tucked the necklace her mom had gifted her into her top and, with a nod of satisfaction at her reflection, Mariel set out to face the day, her attire a reflection of her complex identity and ambitious spirit.

Breakfast was waiting for her when she got downstairs, and she greeted Nell as she sat down between the paladin and her mom. “So, just us?” Mariel asked after grabbing the first bite of her food.

Her mom nodded. “Yup. Stefan is going to wait here for a meeting with someone. That terran advisor reached out and Stefan is going to meet with the woman’s assistant or something. Nemura will be with him.”

Nell cleared her throat. Sloane sighed. “Vesper and Tiberius too.”

Mariel raised a brow. “W-what? Why? What if—”

“There will be no need for a weapon of war at this meeting, Lady Mariel,” Nell said with confidence.

“Nell’s right. We want to make a good impression. The only difficult part of this meeting is that you’ll likely have to meet with the high priestess alone after the initial discussion.”

“B-But...”

The paladin gave her a soft smile. “You worry too much. This will be a formality. I have spent considerable time with you and I know you are an ardent follower of the Family. You have simply found a worldly family that loves you, as well. There is no shame in that and it is to be rejoiced.”

The woman clearly saw Mariel’s continued reluctance because she chuckled ruefully. “If all else fails, my orders supersede any others here within the city. Your mother will not leave you behind, therefore you are coming along even if I have to swear to bring the matter before the Archpriestess herself so she may mediate the issue.”

Mariel couldn’t help but gasp at that. The Archpriestess? That was insane, there’s no way a simple paladin had that kind of pull. But... she had to admit, the woman’s orders were *quite* insistent that she assist Sloane in whatever was needed to travel to Avira with all haste.

She couldn’t *wait* to see what the hell her sister was up to that made her so interesting to the Church.

Mariel was still smiling when a certain huffy man came stomping into the room. “Sloane... your daughter—”

“Yeah, I know Stefan. I already got onto her.” Her mom fixed her with a stern look. “*Didn’t* I?”

Mariel forced herself to look suitably chastened. “Yes, she did. Sorry, *Steffy*.” She glanced around. “Where’s Mister Bigglesworth?”

## Oxylus

His eyes narrowed. “In my room. In several pieces after I sent him flying.”

Mariel shrugged and went back to her food. She’d go grab her little friend later and put him back together.

She was already thinking of her next prank. Nemura was a difficult target, but she’d think of something.

Mariel couldn’t wait to collaborate with her sister. Whatever it was that had the Church interested, Mariel was sure insane magic or some mischief was involved—Gwyn tricked everyone into making her a princess after all.

And if it was mischief? Well, Mariel just knew they were going to get along splendidly.



The temple of Calling loomed before them, a grand structure of stone and stained glass, its spires reaching towards the heavens like fingers of the devout in prayer. To Mariel, the temple was a fortress of faith, a place where the sacred and the worldly mingled. Its vast doors were carved with intricate patterns and stories of the gods and empyreans, inviting all who sought solace and guidance. She had to admit, even the temple of Marketbol was nowhere near as imposing or beautiful as this one.

Mariel sat in between her mom and Nell on a bench outside of the temple next to one of the fountains, just wasting time until their appointment. They could have waited inside, but her mom wanted to enjoy the atmosphere. Mariel found that something both endearing and sad about her, how she would just sit in a public area like this and watch people go about their day.

It was times like these that Mariel wanted to hold her mom tightly, because she could see how it affected her. She hid it well, but seeing people and families out together and happy... really upset her mom. From what Mariel knew, Sloane was especially close with her sister. They would use those human devices called phones—which was kind of like her excerpt reader but handheld—to speak to people anywhere in the world and her mom would speak to her sister with it every day.

But, for now, the three of them sat there and spoke about random things as the city went about its day.

Around them, people bustled, some in quiet discussion with the priests that were out and about amongst the crowd, others in animated conversation with each other. Mariel noticed the varied attire of the crowd—from simple tunics of the common folk to the elaborate robes of the few higher clergy while a handful of temple guards and the odd paladin patrolled the area. Everyone that walked by gave Nell a nod of respect, especially the paladins who would stop, say a few words, then move on.

## Manabound - Resilience

Others around her age in robes that were familiar walked between the priests, bringing them water or various goods that the priests would use to help those in need.

It was something the temples always did. Anyone could enter the temple, but the younger priests would roam the plazas, speaking to and assisting the people. Rarely would they even speak of the gods except to give thanks.

These acts were about community and providing service. It was something Mariel always enjoyed assisting with, because it was those times that she really felt like she was contributing.

It was such an odd feeling for Mariel to be away from it all. She had lived that life for so long, day in and day out she had helped perform tasks within the temple.

“This is incredible,” her mom murmured at her side. “It reminds me so much of home. It’s times like these that I really miss it.”

Mariel glanced at her mother, noting the curiosity that sparkled in her eyes. “Were the temples like this in the town where you lived?”

Sloane shook her head. “Nope. I wasn’t especially religious, to be honest. I mean, my family was and we always went to mass when I was growing up, but I drifted away from that life when I got older. Gwyn had a religion class in school, but that was about it. Although, there was this cute church in town that had a beautiful bell tower. You could hear it chime all over town, which, I know isn’t uncommon here, but back home? It was something I loved. It was also right across the bridge from a lovely little gelato shop Gwyn and I would go to all the time.”

Mariel smiled. “You know, I think you really need to make this ‘gelato’ for me with how often you talk about it.”

Her mom giggled. “Well, then that’s something we’ll figure out when we finally settle down with your sister.” She turned to Nell. “Ever heard of a nut called pistachio? Uhm, typically from a more desert area, the nut inside the shell can get pretty green?”

The paladin shook her head. “I cannot say that I have.”

“Shame. I would either order a scoop of pistachio or mint to go with some chocolate. So good.” Her mom started mumbling in Italian and Mariel only caught a few words from their practice. She wasn’t sure, but it sounded like her mom was speaking about this gelato as if it were a lost lover.

It was a bit weird.

But Mariel wouldn’t judge. Well, at least not harshly.

“Mariel,” Nell started. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah. A bit nervous, but yeah.”

Her mom grabbed her hand and squeezed. “Don’t worry. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Nell placed a comforting hand on Mariel’s shoulder. “Your path has led you elsewhere, but your faith and your dedication are no less worthy. You’re a warrior, just like my brothers and sisters in Alos.”

Mariel smiled faintly. “Thanks, Nell.”

Getting inside of the temple was a quick affair with Nell around, and soon enough they were standing outside of a door. Mariel’s nervousness was through the roof, her heart was pounding and if she had to admit, her hands were a bit clammy.

The priest-in-training that had guided them to the office knocked on the door and stepped in, Mariel started getting even more antsy, but then her mom’s hand found its way into hers and squeezed. It made her feel better and she looked up at her mom and smiled, mouthing thank you to her.

When the door reopened, the teenager wished them a good day and left, only to leave them with an older sun elf woman who looked like she could be a grandma to someone her mom’s age.

“Ah, good morning!” the woman said with her gaze fixed on Sloane. “You must be Baroness Reinhart.” Her eyes shifted to Nell and she greeted the paladin in a warm, professional manner before focusing on Mariel. “And you are the young woman of the hour, I see. Please, come in.”

The room they entered was simple yet elegant, adorned with religious symbols and a few modest paintings that lent a serene atmosphere to the space. The older sun elf gestured for them to take a seat around a small, ornate table. Mariel sat down, her eyes darting around the room, taking in every detail.

The woman introduced herself as High Priestess Thaeli, her voice carrying the wisdom of years and the gentleness of a nurturing spirit. “I was given a vague understanding of what has occurred, and I have been keeping apprised of the situation with the cult,” she began, addressing Sloane. “Your tale is quite extraordinary, and the bond you’ve forged with young Mariel here is nothing short of remarkable. Tell me about your travels from Marketbol and your reasons for seeking legal guardianship of young Mariel, here.”

Mariel watched and listened as her mom began, her voice steady as she recounted the dangers they’d faced, the battles fought, and the bonds formed. The high priestess listened intently, occasionally nodding or asking for clarification. As Sloane spoke of their adventures and the fierce loyalty they had developed for one another, Mariel’s heart swelled with pride and affection.

It made Mariel remember the early days after they met, the awkwardness, the uncertainty when she stood at Shalas’s side looking at this tall woman who held a sort of confidence that put even



paladins she knew to shame. A noble, and an influential one at that. She had literally *saved* the city, and Shalas said Mariel would be going with her? There was no way that wouldn't be intimidating.

Then came the gifts from Sloane. The art supplies, the books, and her favorite: the diaries. She had a notebook that she would use to jot down important things from her studies, and she had the notebook from Shalas that had all of the information about her magic. But this was something completely new. It had taken Sloane explaining it and promising it was for her and her alone to give her the courage to try it. It was simple, a place to pour her thoughts and fears. But it had become a treasure, a chronicle of their adventures and her growth.

She remembered the countless times spent over tea, discussing books they had read, or the latest piece of art Mariel had attempted. Even though she was really bad at it, Sloane had a way of making her feel like her work was important, like she was important. They talked about goals and dreams, and as Mariel's magic grew, so did her dreams. They evolved from simple notions of survival to ambitions of mastery and necromantic benevolence. Sloane had giggled like a girl for a long time when Mariel had mentioned that one.

Apparently Earth had very different notions of necromancers.

Mariel wasn't sure how she felt about that, but her mom supported her anyways despite the occasional comment about how 'she, for one, welcomed their new undead overlords'.

She decided her mom was great enough to be free from pranks after that. Well, for a while at least.

Speaking of dreams, Mariel enjoyed listening to her mom's. Dreams she had held when she was younger, those she made after giving birth to Gwyn.

Sloane often talked about finding Gwyn and what they would all do afterward. There was always a hint of nervousness, an undercurrent of anxiety about the reunion. But there was hope too, a fierce determination that they would make it, that the three of them would be a family.

Mariel always livened those talks up by brainstorming ways to combine her magic with Gwyn's. Not that she knew what Gwyn's magic was about other than 'honestly kind of scary strong' according to her mom's brief interaction in her inner self during the refinement.

*I really hope I can reach my refinement soon.*

It was the late night talks about Gwyn's father that had Mariel hugging her mom, who seemed fine, but Mariel could tell it was still a touchy subject. Her mom had closed herself off, and it took going to another world to start to open up again.

Which was an entirely different mess.



Especially when it came to the discussions about Nemura. Mariel could sense the conflict in Sloane, the desire to maintain a friendship without hurting the telv's feelings. It was a delicate balance, one that Mariel didn't envy. Nemura was head-over-heels for her mom and she wasn't shy to admit it. She was crazy protective, and super motherly to the both of them.

But her mom didn't want a relationship. She said that was her past; that Gwyn and Mariel were the future. It was honestly quite sad, and Mariel knew that she had to discuss an intervention with her sister after they met. Their mother deserved love, no matter who it was with.

*I hope you're ready for that Gwyn. We've got to help her out.*

As much as Mariel adored Nemura, she could understand another reason for Sloane's reluctance—Nemura was her mom's retainer. While she knew her mom was actually a commoner on Earth, here she had been granted a real peerage by someone who was effectively a princess. Even if Ser Ismeld didn't actually have the title, her grandfather was a king so in both Mariel and Sloane's minds it counted.

But it wasn't all heavy topics. They laughed about Mariel's love for all things cute and cuddly, a stark contrast to her necromantic abilities which was something that her mom *loved*. It was during one of these conversations that Mariel had come to some difficult conclusions about herself and what other cute and cuddly things she liked. Sloane was there, and was supportive and understanding as always. They had talked it through, her mom had related her own journey of self discovery and Mariel felt lighter, freer for it.

Her mom even let her in on a secret she suspected about her sister, and Mariel remembered smiling about how alike they were. She loved being part of a family. She loved her mom and she loved the sister she would soon meet.

Now, as she sat with the high priestess, those memories filled her with a sense of warmth. She was no longer that scared girl, unsure of her place in the world. She was Mariel Lunaris Reinhart, necromancer and soon-to-be legally adopted daughter of the woman who had become her everything.

Sloane had given her a family, a purpose, and a sense of self. Mariel was ready to face whatever came next, together with her mom and their found family.

Mariel sat there as her mom finished up, both she and Nell answering questions the high priestess posed. And when Sloane concluded, the High Priestess turned her attention to Mariel. "And what about you, Mariel? How do you feel about all this? Your journey and your mother here? You've clearly grown since leaving the temple and that path. Tell me about it."

Mariel hesitated, then spoke. "It's been... a lot. But I've never felt more alive, more purposeful. And Sloane," she glanced at her mom, "she's been everything. I trust her with my life. It's been one mess after another that's taken us so long to get here, and I'll admit it was scary quite often. I've had to

fight monsters, and learn things about myself I would have never known otherwise. So yeah, very scary.” She chuckled to herself and found herself thinking about how she would never have been allowed to have all of her little friends at the Temple. “But in a way that’s been a blessing. It’s given me more time to come to know mom and to find something I had been longing for for so long. So, yeah. We went through a lot together, but I would have it no other way. I love my mom and she loves me.”

Sloane reached over and squeezed her hand. “I love you too, Mar. I am so lucky to have you in my life.”

The High Priestess nodded thoughtfully. “Very well. Mariel, I’d like to speak with you alone if that’s alright. It’s standard procedure to ensure all parties are acting of their own free will.”

Sloane squeezed Mariel’s hand again before letting go in a silent message of support. Mariel nodded and watched as Sloane and Nell excused themselves, leaving her alone with the High Priestess.

“Firstly, Mariel, know that you can speak freely here,” the woman began. “This is a safe place. I must say this, and I do not mean any offense... but sometimes, nobles find something interesting or notable in children they come across. Sometimes those same nobles think that by giving that child a home and attention, they will be beholden to them and will use their gift to support them.” Mariel really wanted to say something about that, but she held her tongue. The high priestess continued, “I am not saying that the baroness is one of these people, but I want you to understand how it could be perceived to someone like me. You have magic, and while I don’t know the details since it appears even Evocati Nell wants to keep it a secret, it is quite strong. This is a strange new... everything we have found ourselves in, and the Church already has had to deal with powerful people trying to collect magical individuals for their own gain. Now, Evocati Nell’s support is *very* strong for your case. But, Mariel, I want to understand, from your perspective, what this adoption means to you.”

Mariel took a deep breath, gathering her thoughts. “It means... family. So for me, It means having someone who cares, really cares. Not because they’re supposed to, but because they want to. Sloane has shown me that, time and again. I’ve learned so much, grown so much. I want to keep growing, with her. Neither Sloane nor I care about all of that noble business. It’s different for her. Things on Earth were different than they are here. She’s my family.”

The High Priestess smiled, a gentle, understanding expression. “I see. You are fifteen now, a year away from adulthood. You could stake out your own path. You could even remain with Lady Sloane without having to—”

“With respect,” Mariel interrupted. “No. I know what you’re going to say, but I don’t want that. I’ve wanted a family ever since my own gave me up. Sloane is my mother. Period. You’re right, I am almost an adult. I could just go, but we want to do this right. To have the world see what I see. That Sloane Reinhart is my mother.”

The room was quiet for a moment, Mariel's words hanging in the air. The High Priestess's expression softened further, a nod acknowledging the depth of Mariel's conviction.

"I understand," she said gently. "It is rare to see such a bond form in these times of turmoil. I commend you both for finding family in each other."

Their conversation continued, delving into the more mundane aspects of what the adoption process would entail. Mariel listened intently, her heart pounding with a mixture of excitement and nervousness. The High Priestess detailed the legalities and the recognition that would come with the adoption. Mariel's mind raced with images of the future, of being officially recognized as Sloane's daughter, of no longer having the shadow of doubt or illegitimacy hanging over her head.

Abruptly, a loud commotion of angry voices echoed from the corridor, disturbing the solemnity of their discussion. Out of it all, Mariel could distinguish her mom's voice, its tone sharp and quite angry. She silently feared for whoever was on the other end of that, quickly followed by a wicked grin. Unless they deserved it, then Mariel could help hide the body. She could animate the poor meatbag and have it stroll right into its grave.

No fuss, no mess. Just another day's work for a budding necromancer.

The High Priestess frowned, her serene demeanor replaced by one of concern. "I apologize," she said, standing up. "It seems there is something I must attend to. But before I go, I want you to know, your honesty and clarity today are much appreciated."

She moved to her desk, quickly signing and stamping a document. "I believe you both have what's best for each other at heart. I will speak with your mother, but I think you would like to be the one to carry this." She handed the document to Mariel.

It was the adoption certificate. Mariel's eyes filled with tears as she took it, her heart swelling with happiness and a sense of belonging that had eluded her for so long.

"...Thank you. Truly, thank you," Mariel whispered. The high priestess laid a hand on her shoulder as she stepped next to her and squeezed. "Of course, dear. I hope you do not regret your time in the Church, but who are we to keep a child from her true happiness? Your life is your path, and I wish you the very best in navigating it. I think you'll do alright, though."

Mariel smiled as the woman walked away.

But then the door swung open, and her moment of joy was shattered by the sight of High Priestess Othiwen, her face twisted in anger. Mariel's stomach dropped, a sense of dread washing over her as she clutched the certificate to her chest, preparing for whatever confrontation was about to unfold.

“You,” Othiwen pointed directly at Mariel with an accusatory finger, her voice a blade sharpened by anger.

Her mom was quick to retort from just behind the fuming high priestess. “Stay away from my daughter,” Sloane’s voice held the steel of a protective mother.

High Priestess Thaeli, who had just moments ago been a beacon of warmth and understanding, furrowed her brows in confusion and concern. “Zeriel, what an unexpected visit. May I inquire as to the reason?”

The other high priestess spun around toward the woman who had just granted Mariel’s adoption. “These three *lied* to me. That girl,” she jabbed a finger towards Mariel again, “is the one I’ve been expecting for *seasons*. I will be taking her into my care and performing Rites of Redemption that are required.”

Sloane stepped forward, but High Priestess Thaeli raised a calming hand. “I regret to inform you, Zeriel, that you no longer have jurisdiction here. The adoption has been finalized. Mariel is under the guardianship of her mother, Baroness Reinhart.” Her mom’s face positively glowed with that news. “She’s free to go wherever her mother chooses.”

A soft murmur of Italian, undoubtedly a string of words meant for less holy ears, slipped from Sloane’s lips, causing Mariel’s lips to twitch upward despite the tension.

“You had no right!” Othiwen’s voice rose, an edge of desperation creeping into her tone. “She was remitted to my order due to circumstances I will not say, and it is my responsibility—”

Thaeli cut her off with a gentle firmness. “The last I heard you had left the city and had not yet returned. In your absence I was well within my rights so I made the decision. They and I have discussed this at length. Mariel has found a new path, one with a family.”

The high priestess’s face reddened further like a storm ready to unleash. “I was dealing with the cult!” Her hand swung around and pointed at Sloane. “And they have something to do with it. This woman... *Baroness Reinhart lied* and hid her identity deliberately. I will be questioning them for information—”

Everyone turned as Nell finally walked into the room.

“You will not be demanding anything, High Priestess,” Nell declared, the room’s attention snapping to her.

Othiwen’s arms crossed defensively. “You too, Evocati? You partook in this deceit. I shall see to it that—”

But Nell only sighed, an air of finality in her gesture. “You really don’t get it, do you? In setting this meeting, I showed the order from the Archpriestess to High Priestess Thaeli. It leaves no room for debate. I’m entrusted with the safe passage of Queen Reinhart to Avira.”

Thaeli nodded. “She did, and there’s nothing any of us can do about it. Evocati Nell has very broad authority when it comes to what she is permitted to do.”

Othiwen’s face drained of color. Her mouth opened and closed, disbelief and confusion swirling in her gaze. “What? Queen?”

Mariel’s smile grew as realization hit the woman, not that she’d ever know the truth. Her mom shrugged. “Do you understand now why I do not just simply give out my name? Especially to groups that outnumber us when we are fighting monsters almost daily? The Praetor in Nornport has my report on the cult with him. In fact, they are lucky that we have other business or I would root them out of whatever holes they are hiding in and expedite their arrival in meeting the goddess they blaspheme.”

She paused and stole a glance at her daughter. “Mariel was a *victim* and as such, my daughter will not be undergoing any rites. She is no longer a part of the Church and simply wants to be away from all of the business that sought to exploit her magic for their gain. She is her own person, with a family that loves her.”

Othiwen seemed to fumble for words, her mouth ajar, but no sound coming out. Seizing the moment of her disarray, Sloane crossed the room and wrapped Mariel in a warm embrace. “Hey, sweetie,” she whispered, pressing a kiss onto the crown of Mariel’s head. “I love you. Ready to leave all this behind?”

Tears of joy glistened in Mariel’s eyes as she nodded vigorously. “Yes, mom. Let’s go.”

Sloane looked over at the two high priestesses. “We will be going now. I have other business that I need to attend to with my daughter.”

“But—”

Thaeli placed a hand on Zeriel’s shoulder and gently pulled her away. “Zeriel, let’s have a discussion, my friend. One of authority and reaching beyond it.”

As much as Mariel wanted to hear more of that, they didn’t. She briefly considered leaving a little friend, but decided that would be too risky. Her mom ushered Mariel out of the room, their footsteps resounding with the promise of freedom and a new beginning.

Outside, the fresh air hit them, and Mariel couldn’t contain her elation. She let out a triumphant squeal, her spirit soaring. “We did it!” She danced around in a whirlwind of excitement and

pumped her fists. It felt amazing. Sure, Sloane had been her mom for some time now, but now it was *official*. “Oh my Tenera, I’m actually your daughter for real now. I’m a noble! A fricking princess!”

Nell chuckled, her eyes crinkling as she watched. “Slow your roll there, Bones.”

That nickname had unfortunately spread.

She continued as the three of them walked in the direction of the inn, “You might be a lady due to your mother’s peerage, but being a princess requires a bit more than just paperwork. Like your sister has with all of her backing and acknowledgements.”

Sloane nodded. “She’s right, but soon that won’t matter. I have some plans in the work, and I think it’s time we met this terran advisor. And you’re an integral part of it. Being a princess might not be in the cards just yet, but what matters is that we’re together as a family”

Mariel shrugged off the notion with ease, her happiness undimmed. “I don’t mind. Having a family is all I ever wanted.”

Her mom pulled her close for a tight side hug. “And you’ve had one for quite some time, my dear.”

They continued down the cobblestone street, the bustle of the city around them fading into the background as they reveled in their shared moment. Mariel looked up at Sloane, her heart full to the brim. She felt tears pricking at her eyes. The only time she’d ever been happier was when her mom had offered to be her mother the first time. This? This was more than she could have ever hoped for—more than magic and bones, even little friends.

This was something to be treasured and cherished, and Mariel would for the rest of her life. She had a family, a mother who loved her, and soon, she’d have a sister to play pranks with.

“Mom,” Mariel whispered, her voice thick with emotion. “I think it’s about time we celebrated with something sweet, don’t you think?”

Sloane chuckled and it sounded so warm and comforting. “Absolutely, Mar. We’ll get something on the way back and share some with the other two.” Her mom nudged her gently with her shoulder. “You know, it’s times like these that would be perfect with some gelato. It’s the ideal treat to share with those you love after something special.”

Mariel huffed a laugh and wiped at her eyes. “Then we better hurry and get to Gwyn so we can make some.”

Her mom’s eyes glistened. “And then we’ll share it as a family.”

With their path set and hearts light, they moved forward, finally past all of the barriers that had stood in their way. They were ready to continue their journey not just to reunite with Gwyn, but to

## Oxylus

build a life filled with love, and maybe if it was as good as her mom swore, then the occasional scoop of gelato. Mariel squeezed her mother's waist, her world complete. "I love you, mom."

"And I love you, Mariel. More than you'll ever know. Let's go find your sister and make our family whole."