

## Dangers in the Night

*The Many Parties War showed the region how easily the weaknesses within the Sovereign's political structure could be exploited. Early in the war, the Vlaredian Empire constantly outmaneuvered the Sovereigns, however, the Siege of Marketbol would come to be known as a pivotal turning point in how it ensured the Sovereigns could maintain their territorial integrity. Not to mention, the siege represented the first time magic was a deciding factor in the outcome of a conflict. Still, that would not be realized for some time, as the Vlaredian navy had launched their own all-out assaults on key cities within the Geraldine Triangle. The Empire's focus disrupted significant portions of trade and travel through the region, causing ramifications for decades.*

*Mana and War: The Many Parties War. 179 SA*

Keston sat and nursed an ale while picking at his lunch. Before setting sail in the evening, He, Kerala, and Captain Tamsin had decided to spend their last day in Swanbrook enjoying a quiet meal at one of the town's most popular taverns. The warm sun streamed in through the windows, casting a reddish glow across the wooden tables and chairs. The tavern was bustling with patrons from the docks, but the trio had managed to snag a quiet corner table.

Keston smiled as he caught sight of his two companions. Kerala seemed to be savoring every bite of her meal. She had ordered a hearty bowl of stew and was happily spooning it into her mouth, her eyes closed in bliss. Captain Tamsin was enjoying a plate of fish and potatoes, occasionally glancing up to people-watch. Keston, on the other hand, absentmindedly picked at his serving of roasted chicken and vegetables, lost in thought.

He couldn't believe that they were finally on the way home and beyond the conflict between the Sovereigns and the Empire. Their travels that were to have taken a couple of seasons had turned into a year-long journey. He had never been away from home for so long, and now he was anxious to return to give the princess the news.

He reminisced about the crazy journey thus far and all they had learned as they reached their destination of Vilstaf. While Westaren itself was filled with turmoil due to a swarm of monsters sweeping the countryside, and even destroying a city, the people that remained were hardy. The army had established several forts that he and Kerala had passed on their way to the burgeoning town of Vilstaf and its survivors.

The town itself was booming with new businesses and houses going up daily. Heavy investment by the Guilds and the kingdom in order to rebuild a city, one that would be a jewel of their nation.

He had heard whispers that the kingdom's rulers had deliberately let Thirdghyll be destroyed, but that was drowned out by those who said the goodwill that was done in Vilstaf proved otherwise. He wasn't sure which was true, but he couldn't deny that the town would soon be impressive. A truly modern city, one that a growing magical company was taking advantage of and pushing their designs on with such profit that had Kerala shocked.

They had learned a lot during the time they had spent with the Farum siblings and the excitement of securing the contract for both Fenren Merchant Company and House Reinhart. Yet, even that was nothing compared to the stunned astonishment when they discovered the trail of Princess Gwyn's mother, Sloane.

In a twist that would be envied by the greatest bards, the very company they had sought to enter into a contract with... had a standing arrangement with their princess's mother.

In fact, just learning about the connection had been enough to sway the two dwarves into a very generous relationship. One that was tied into the contract they already held with Sloane.

His disappointment about missing Sloane Reinhart though was palpable. That was quelled slightly when he learned the woman was currently on her way to Avira. However, he did learn she was traveling by land. With luck, she would already be there when he returned.

While they still had over sixteen hundred kilometers to go before they were back in Strathmore, it felt good to have an end in sight, especially one that would take a considerably shorter time.

Just the thought of Gwyn finally reuniting with her mother was enough to put a smile on his face.

He glanced up as two people stepped away from the bar and walked toward them. Keston watched as a frankly intimidating telv woman led a raithe man that was about a head shorter than her. The raithe wore sophisticated dark grey clothing with hints of blue. His red eyes were constantly searching the area over top of his high collars which hid his shoulder-length white hair. His waist was occupied by two scabbards, where the man rested his hands on the hilts of some long daggers.

The telv on the other hand was clearly a warrior or soldier. She wore a shawl that was draped over the top of her head, which made her copper hair and bright golden eyes even more intimidating. She wore a fitted black leather chest piece that clearly showed her muscular, tattooed arms that would have even intimidated Taenya. She had a long sword strapped to her right hip, and her left held a curved dagger that, judging by the scabbard, was as long as Keston's forearm.

The two approached their table, and the telv woman gave them a respectful nod. “Greetings, I apologize for interrupting your meal,” the woman said. “We heard that you were merchants with a ship traveling through.”

Captain Tamsin glanced at Kerala before looking up at the woman. “We are. How can we help you?” he asked.

The raithe man smiled, his two fangs prominently displayed. “I am Stefan, and this is Nemura. We are looking for passage on a vessel that will be traveling through Rosale, and we heard that you are Aviran.”

Captain Tamsin looked at Stefan and Nemura thoughtfully. “I see,” he said, stroking his beard. The man glanced to Kerala, who leaned in and whispered to the captain. While he was in charge of the company’s vessel, she held her father’s authority in dictating their route. The captain looked back up at the two. “We are indeed heading towards Rosale, but we have a tight schedule to keep and will not be making port at any of the cities. We need to get back to Avira as soon as possible. We will be stopping at Parholm to resupply, but after that, we will not be stopping until we reach Maireharbora.”

Stefan's smile faded slightly, and he looked crestfallen. “I understand,” he said, “but our business is in Rosale and Parholm is over a hundred kilometers from the border. Our employer is more than willing to pay extra for the inconvenience. It would just be us and two others in our party.”

Kerala spoke up, a tinge of regret in her voice. “I'm sorry, but we really can't afford to delay our journey. Our business in Avira is time-sensitive.”

Nemura nodded slowly, understanding their predicament. “I see,” she said, “thank you for considering our request. We will have to find another way to reach our destination.”

The telv woman gave them another nod before she and Stefan turned to leave. As they walked away, Keston couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt and by the look on Kerala's face, she did as well. They simply could not delay. On the off chance Gwyn's mother hadn't reached her daughter, they needed to let Siveril and the princess know that she was alive and well.

Kerala's eyes followed the two. “I'm sorry we couldn't help them,” she said. “But we have to keep moving forward. Right, Keston?”

Keston nodded. “Yes, we have to get word to Her Highness.”

He almost missed the slight stutter in Nemura's step as the two approached another merchant.



The port of Swanbrook was a bustling hub of activity, with ships of all sizes docked at the piers and sailors moving about their business. The air was thick with the scent of salt and sea, and the sound of waves crashing against the shore provided a constant backdrop of white noise.

Sloane sat beside Mariel on a stone bench outside a popular port bar. Inside, Nemura and Stefan scoured the establishment for a merchant willing to transport them to the Kingdom of Rosale.

Eona, unlike Earth, lacked the convenience of transportation stations where one could simply purchase a ticket to travel. Instead, obtaining passage required negotiations with individual merchants or, if fortunate, seeing if any had posted notices with the Merchant's Guild. However, the exorbitant fees demanded by that avenue rendered them unpopular amongst both the merchants and those seeking passage.

There was a Caravaneers' Guild, but unfortunately, getting to Rosale by land would take far too long for their timeline.

Once there, they could seek further means of travel to Calling, the capital city, where Mariel needed to be escorted to the temple.

The thirteen-year-old raithe girl was on edge, her nerves heightened by the recent events leading up to their arrival in Swanbrook. She seemed unable to relax once the knights and the safety they provided dissipated with their departure. The young girl's eyes constantly flicked around whenever a large group of people walked nearby as if she were afraid that they could be attacked at any moment.

While Sloane did not doubt that could be true, she had a hard time believing a large force would try something *inside* the city. This is why Sloane kept the girl close and watched for suspicious individuals because opportunistic people didn't need a large group to kidnap a single child.

As Sloane kept a watchful eye on Mariel, she couldn't help but take note of the people around them. The port was a hub of activity, with merchants and travelers of all kinds bustling about. A group of sailors chatted boisterously as they unloaded cargo from a nearby ship, while a family with young children laughed and played on the edge of the dock. In the distance, Sloane could hear the haggling voices of merchants and customers negotiating deals.

A group of rowdy men stumbled out of the bar, their raucous laughter making Sloane's stomach turn. As she watched them, she almost missed the pair of shady-looking characters skulking about in the shadows, their eyes darting back and forth as they surveyed their surroundings and watched a group of passing guards. Something about them made her uneasy, and she kept a close eye on them as they seemingly made a decision before rushing away, disappearing into a crowd.

She knew that in a place like this, danger could lurk around every corner. And with Mariel's safety at stake, she couldn't afford to let her guard down. So she kept a

watchful eye on the people around them, always ready to spring into action if the need arose.

As she scanned the crowd, she noticed Nemura and Stefan emerging from the bar, their expressions determined.

Nemura strode over to the bench, her long legs carrying her effortlessly across the port's cobblestones. Stefan trailed behind her, his red eyes scanning the area for any potential threats.

"We found a merchant," Nemura said as she reached the bench. "His ship is leaving in four days, after the settling of the tides."

Sloane nodded in acknowledgment, grateful that they had found a way to leave Swanbrook. She turned to Mariel, who had been staring intently at the ground, lost in thought.

"Mariel," Sloane said gently. "We've found a way to get to Rosale."

The young priestess-in-waiting looked up, her eyes brightening at the news. "That's great!" she exclaimed. "Thank you, all of you."

Sloane smiled, happy to see the young girl's spirits lifted. "Of course," she said. "We're here to help."

As they spoke, Sloane couldn't help but notice another two rough-looking men eyeing them from across the port. Their shabby clothes and unkempt appearance marked them as sailors or dockworkers, but there was something in their demeanor that made Sloane uneasy.

She narrowed her eyes, staring them down with a fierce intensity. The men seemed to sense her scrutiny and quickly hurried away as they weaved through the crowds.

*Maybe I'm being a bit paranoid. Looking for things not there...*

Stefan noticed Sloane staring and followed her gaze. He frowned when he saw the two men and quickly assessed the situation.

"Something wrong, Sloane?" he asked, his voice low.

Sloane didn't take her eyes off the pair. "Just keeping an eye on those two," she replied, her voice equally quiet. "They're the second pair of men that have had an interest in either us or something over here, and I don't like the look of them."

Nemura, who had been listening in, stepped forward. "Shall I go and check them out?" she asked, cracking her knuckles.

Stefan shook his head. "No, we don't want to draw attention to ourselves. Let's just keep an eye on them and make sure they don't try anything. I know this city, they could be any number of things."

Sloane sighed. "Let's keep our guard up, just in case," she said, paranoia and unease still clawing its way up her spine.

Nemura nodded. "Agreed. We should return to the inn for the day." She glanced at Mariel. "Mariel, would you care to walk with me?"

Sloane narrowed her eyes. She distinctly recalled the woman stating that she was bad with children. This seemed like a ploy.

"Yes, Miss Nemura," the girl said, giving Sloane a quick glance before stepping beside the telv that was about fifty centimeters taller than her. It was quite amusing to watch.

As soon as they started walking away, Sloane turned on Stefan. "Alright, let me have it. I know this was just so you could speak privately," she said in a low voice.

Stefan nodded, his expression serious. "We need to talk about the men who attacked us on the road. They were part of a mercenary group, but I haven't been able to find out who hired them yet."

Sloane's jaw tensed at the mention of the attack. "I knew the whole thing seemed too easy," she muttered, referring to the escort request, her eyes flicking to the young raithe girl who walked ahead of them next to Nemura. "What have you found out so far?"

Stefan shook his head. "Not much. The group they belonged to is known for taking any job that pays well, no questions asked. They are a large company, but losing the number of men they did has them angry. The company sent men asking around the Blade's Guild. Unfortunately, it seems that the only ones who knew who hired them died in the attack."

Sloane sighed, running a hand through her hair. "I don't like this. It's too risky having Mariel out and about with us if someone's willing to go to such lengths to get to her. We need to be extra cautious," she said. "I have been on edge. I feel like anyone out here could be after her."

The raithe nodded. "I agree. We'll need to keep a close eye on her and be ready for anything. We don't know who we can trust."

"What about the church?" she asked.

Stefan stared at the girl ahead of them as if considering the action.

Sloane followed Stefan's gaze, watching as Mariel walked alongside Nemura, deep in conversation. Mariel's hands were clasped before her, and her eyes were focused on Nemura, who listened intently.

Sloane turned back to Stefan, who was still lost in thought. She could tell that he was hesitant to speak, but she knew that it was important.

"Stefan," she prodded. "What is it?"

“I don’t know if we can trust them either. How did they find out about our travels? The paladins took a lot of effort to bring her to us inconspicuously,” he said quietly.

Sloane furrowed her brow in concern. It was a valid point. The paladins who had entrusted them with Mariel's safety had been careful to keep their movements secret, and yet somehow these mercenaries had managed to find them. It didn't bode well.

“Let’s try the local paladins, then. I’ll make sure Mariel knows to not speak on her affiliation. We still do not know *why* she is important,” Sloane said.

Stefan took a deep breath. “I agree, but let's go without her at first,” he said finally. “We can also try to gather information from the locals. It's possible that someone saw something or knows something that can help us. We just have to be careful not to draw too much attention to ourselves.”

Sloane nodded in agreement. “Agreed. For now, let’s get back to the inn. Maybe we can have Nemura stay with Mariel while you and I go check things out.”

His face screwed up. “Sloane, you are not exactly... subtle.”

Sloane chuckled. “That’s what you’re here for, Stefan. You’re the master of stealth and intrigue, remember? I’m the distraction while you get the goods.”

Stefan rolled his eyes but couldn't help but smile at Sloane's reminder of their time in Thirdghyll. “Alright, fine. I’ll see what information I can gather without drawing too much attention to myself. Let’s go meet the paladins.”

“But first, food.”

He snorted. “First, food, indeed. The smell of piss and rotten fish has me especially hungry.”

Sloane wrinkled her nose. “Let's hope the inn has something better than that on the menu.”



The next day Sloane walked with Stefan into Swanbrook’s primary temple to the Family. As they entered the temple, they were greeted by the peaceful silence that permeated the air. The temple was a large, open space with tall, marble columns lining the walls. The ceiling was high, and sunlight poured in from the stained glass windows, casting a warm, multicolored glow over the room.

A young priest immediately greeted them as they entered. “Welcome, my children,” the priest said with a warm smile. “How may I assist you today?”

Sloane raised a brow. “Pretty sure I am older than you.”

The young telv didn’t miss a beat. “Ah, but we are all children of Eona.”

She rolled her eyes, but Stefan spoke up, “We were hoping to speak with one of the paladins stationed here,” he said. “We have some urgent matters to discuss.”

The priest gave them a small bow before disappearing through a side door. Sloane and Stefan took a seat on one of the wooden benches that lined the walls, settling in to wait for the paladin to arrive.

As they waited, Sloane looked around the temple, taking in the beauty of the space. Despite her lack of affiliation with the world’s religion, she couldn't help but feel a sense of peace in the tranquil surroundings.

Stefan leaned over and spoke in a low voice. “What are we going to tell the paladin? We can't reveal too much about Mariel or our mission.”

Sloane nodded. “I know. We'll have to be careful. Maybe we can just ask if there have been any suspicious characters or activities in the area lately.”

Before Stefan could respond, the side door opened, and a tall, broad-shouldered sun elf entered. The man was young, easily in his early twenties, and had a light stubble covering his face. He wore the red armor of the Paladins of Alos, and his face was stern but not unkind.

“Greetings,” he said in a deep voice. “I'm Vicori Fynn. The priest said you wished to speak with a paladin?”

Sloane and Stefan stood up, and the raithe, his head tilted in confusion, spoke first, “With respect, Vicori, but is your order’s ranking member available? We wish to speak of something that may be above your purview.”

The man narrowed his eyes. “Unfortunately, Evocati Yemina is occupied, and Praetor Moren has left the city. That leaves you with me. I assure you, I have the authority to act as needed to assist you in any manner befitting the Order.”

Sloane noticed Stefan’s slight fidget so she took over. “Yes, we were hoping to ask a few questions. We're travelers passing through, and we've heard some concerning rumors about the area.”

Fynn raised an eyebrow. “Rumors? What kind of rumors?”

Sloane hesitated for a moment before continuing. “We've heard that there may be some dangerous individuals operating in the area. We were hoping you could give us some information about any recent suspicious activity. There is concern within our party that we could run into issues.”

Fynn's expression grew serious. “I see. We haven't had any reports of criminal activity out of the norm in the city, but I can certainly make some inquiries. Can you provide me with any more details?”

Sloane and Stefan exchanged a quick look before Sloane spoke again. “I'm afraid we don't have much to go on. We're just trying to stay vigilant and keep ourselves and those around us safe.”



The man nodded slowly. "May I ask where you are traveling from?"

That made Sloane pause.

*How much can I say? Well, just traveling from Marketbol doesn't seem too crazy.*

She decided it couldn't hurt. "Marketbol."

The man nodded again. "I heard about the siege, good thing you all made it out safely. You wouldn't happen to have met with any of the Order there, did you? One of my brothers from my training cohort was assigned there."

*Okay, this is suspicious. Play it cool.*

"We met several, actually," she said slowly.

The man seemed to perk up as she confirmed to have met paladins. He smiled. "He is a vicori, like myself. His name—"

Sloane relaxed. Clearly, the man was just concerned about his friend. She cut him off, "I am sorry, I didn't meet anyone with the rank of vicori" She glanced at Stefan. "Did you, Stefan?"

"No, sorry, Vicori," Stefan said with a shake of his head. "We only met with the city's Praetor. She did say that she was sending her paladins to various towns in the area to check on the temples, though."

The paladin let out a sigh. "Praetor Shalas is a wonderful woman," he said, before looking at Sloane. "Very friendly and open, wouldn't you say?"

Sloane raised a brow. "Uhm." She was at a loss for words. She glanced at Stefan who also seemed similarly confused. "She was certainly a character," Sloane said finally.

The man huffed a laugh. "Please, follow me," he said with a gesture toward the door. "I think we should speak privately."

Sloane and Stefan exchanged a look of concern before following the paladin out of the temple and into a nearby garden. They walked down a winding path that led to a small, secluded gazebo. Fynn gestured for them to sit before taking a seat himself.

"Now, please tell me what this is really about," Fynn said, his voice serious. "You clearly have met her. Praetor Shalas is a crotchety woman, who wouldn't be open on her best day."

Sloane huffed a laugh. "You could say that again," she agreed. "Now, in return for other concessions, we are performing an... errand for her. However, we were attacked on the way to Swanbrook."

She glanced at Stefan, and the man continued for her, "This is why we wished to speak with someone... higher ranking, Vicori."

The sun elf sighed before looking around. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a small scroll. "This arrived a week ago. A message from my brother in Alos," he

explained. “Praetor Shalas had him reach out because of our mutual trust. You must be Sloane. We had a code that we made up to communicate with each other secretly. I was asked to provide any assistance you needed if you sought it.”

Sloane let out a quiet gasp. “Yes, I’m Sloane... How did—”

He lifted a hand. “This is more serious than you thought. Swanbrook’s Praetor is missing, and Evocati Yemina is investigating. Due to the city’s fighting with the empire—”

Sloane’s eyes widened. “The city is fighting the empire?”

The young man tilted his head. “You didn’t hear when you arrived? The Swanbrook army is holding off a large imperial army at the Gearldine River west of us. They’ve been fighting for a season, ever since Weltsonsdan fell to the empire.”

Stefan shook his head. “Admittedly, we weren’t looking for that information. We have been trying to leave as soon as possible.”

Vicori Fynn nodded. “I agree with that. With everything that is happening, you should. However, regarding your issues. Even this is not private enough. Meet me tonight after the last bell, there is a small garden in Emerald Groves Park. I will explain what I can.”

Sloane exchanged a glance with Stefan before nodding. “Understood. We will see you then.”

As they all stood, Fynn lowered his voice. “And do not speak of this with anyone. Especially members of the Church.”

Stefan’s face grew serious. “Understood.”



Sloane and Stefan walked through the streets of Swanbrook as they headed toward the park where they would meet the paladin vicori. It was late and the only lights were the occasional oil lamps that hung from posts that lined the cobblestone sidewalks.

The air was cool and damp, and the sound of their footsteps echoed through the quiet streets. As they walked, Sloane couldn't help but feel a sense of unease. She had a feeling that something was off about the city, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

Even the paladin had known something was wrong. Who had hired the mercenaries to try and kidnap Mariel? What happened to the praetor that was assigned to the city’s temple?

Stefan noticed her unease and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “We'll be fine, Sloane. We've faced worse than this.”

Sloane forced a smile. “I know. It's just... something doesn't feel right.”

Stefan nodded in understanding. "We'll find out what it is tonight. Fynn seems like he knows something."

Emerald Groves Park was a sprawling green space that served as the lungs of the city. It was a beautiful and peaceful place, filled with trees of all shapes and sizes that provided plenty of shade for people to relax under during the day. The park was well-maintained, with manicured lawns and carefully tended flower beds that bloomed with a riot of colors that were visible even in the moonlight. The air was filled with the sweet scent of flowers and the soft rustling of leaves.

As Sloane and Stefan made their way deeper into the park, they came across a small garden that was hidden away from the main paths. It was a quiet and secluded spot, surrounded by hedges and shrubs that shielded it from the rest of the park. In the center of the garden was a small fountain, the water trickling softly into a pool. A few stone benches were scattered around the fountain, providing a quiet place to sit and reflect.

On the opposite side of the fountain, they saw the dim outline of a figure sitting on a bench, leaning against the backrest with his hands folded in his lap.

The man was in plain clothes, but even out of armor, she recognized the sun elf's broad shoulders. The man's eyes were closed as if he were lost in thought.

Sloane and Stefan quickened their pace as they approached Fynn. As they drew closer, they could see that something was wrong. Fynn's head was tilted to one side, and his chest was unnaturally still. Panic set in as she realized that he wasn't breathing.

Rushing over, Sloane knelt beside him and placed two fingers on his neck, searching for a pulse. She couldn't find one. She turned to Stefan, who looked just as stunned as she did.

"He's dead," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "His body isn't even cold."

Stefan nodded, his eyes scanning the area for any sign of danger. "We have to get out of here, now. Maybe—"

As they stood up, they heard the sound of footsteps crunching on the gravel path behind them.