

It took a few days of asking around for Sloan to figure out why Stonewing carried such a disastrous air about it. During her investigation, the gravents — not small flying crooks, she had to remind herself — likened an increase in human disease to a few years where odd things happened around the beginning of the Long Night season.

The Long Night celebrated the wayward souls that traversed the land of Skire, where participants were expected to either help the spirits along with the assistance of whicks, or ward the spirits away using a colorful array of candles installed in their windows. sometimes, other strange things would happen, and this year, it was humans and nautipods falling ill with an incurable and novel disease.

Sloan didn't feel ill despite feilding the same question from every gravent that peered at her with wary suspicion. Her sluggishness had everything to do with the way Skire in particular bogged her down with magic spilling from every observable substance around her. She exerted more effort to do what she needed because Ofae didn't have as much raw energy coursing through it, favoring water and earth magics above everything else.

While there was air on Ofae, the atmosphere was so thin by comparison that breathing on Eeridi took a long period of adjusting for those who didn't travel between the planet and the moon frequently.

Sloan had no desire to explain this to the gravents, so she merely ignored them or muttered that she felt fine and to mind their own business, which was an impossible feat for gravents on a cultural level.

It was to the point where Sloan gathered that Bird-Helm wouldn't have stayed in Stonewing for longer than a few weeks if he didn't jettison himself immediately. Bird-Helm hated interrogations, and ran away at every opportunity, such was the way of the flighty nautipod.

However, Sloan wouldn't be able to leave Stonewing without money, and with the trickle of nautipods leaving the supposed safety of Meteor Lake drying up, the avenues for gaining a cashflow were similarly drying up. If she didn't do something quick, she'd be stuck in the center of a continent-wide plague.

"I want to get to a place called Uto," Sloan explained to a harried looking gravent at the same docking station she originally arrived at.

The gravent attendant flitted from booth to booth, doling out tickets and tossing crowns into registers at a lightning pace, chirping and gossiping just as quickly. Sloan found it impressive for only a moment, but mostly found it annoying and distasteful.

“Sorry,” the gravent replied when they finally got back to her. “It’s pretty busy. You’ll need to take a portal if you’re trying to go to Uto, but the line’s pretty long.”

”Why?”

”I don’t know what the official reason is,” they said after another round to the ticketing booths. “But whatever it is is making my life a living hell, so if you’re gonna buy a ticket, buy one, if not, please step to the side so I can continue taking orders. Portal services are next door. Maybe they can help you.”

Sloan took a deep breath and stepped to the side. The station bustled around her, packed to the gills with patrons flooding in. Most of them weren’t nautipods or gravents, but humans, cccats, and crooks, seeing safety. In times of rising tensions, she thought it helpful to listen in on conversation, made easy when everyone was trying to figure out what, exactly, had been going on.

“Earthquakes in the sticks,” a crook said to their traveling companion. “Scary stuff.”

”I heard they’re really bad,” said a cccat to a human, who nursed a bottle of a foul smelling medicine. “Like not normal levels of bad. I wonder if it’s because of the Long Night season.”

”I hope it won’t be like what happened last year.”

”It’s the Long Night, what did you expect?”

It kept coming up, the Long Night, and Sloan grew curious enough to look into it. She already knew she wouldn’t be going anywhere without a way to pay, so she trawled through the streets of Stonewing, noting how the sky seemed fuller than before, with gravents flying in large flocks to balconies she couldn’t reach without wings of her own.

”Hey!”

Sloan turned to Calliope pushing through the crowds to get to her.

"Light-Foot, right?" Calliope said, huffing. She had a wheeled suitcase at her side, and she appeared bedraggled and stressed out. "Funny running into you again."

"If I didn't know any better," Sloan replied, voice cool. "I'd suspect you of following me. Opalhoof, I remember you."

"Still acclimating I see," Calliope said with a grimace. She smoothed her fur down, and the purple markings lining her chest sparkled in the sunlight. "I thought I'd at least try to build some rapport with you, provided you still need help finding Bird-Helm."

"I recall stating that I could not wait on you," Sloan said.

"Yeah, well, have you had any luck on your own?"

"He is most certainly not here. But something else is amiss, and it's making information gathering quite difficult."

Calliope huffed, blowing the loose blonde hairs dangling over her eyes out of the way. "Yeah, they say something's happening out in the wilderness. Something about earthquakes, but I have a bad feeling about it, so I decided to actually stay here for a bit. For as long as I can afford anyway."

"That seems to be a common problem here," Sloan replied with a grimace of her own. "Capital."

"That's how it's always been." Calliope gripped the handle of her suitcase tighter. "Are you going to be okay?"

"I'm not sick, if that's what you mean."

Calliope tilted her head. "Well, that's not really what I meant. I was asking more about if you had a safe place to stay."

"I can fend for myself."

"If you say so."

Sloan was about to leave when she stopped herself. "What can you tell me about the Long Night? I hear the birds talking about it a lot. Is that what makes Stonewing cursed?"

Calliope raised a brow. She'd never heard of Stonewing being cursed, but she chalked it up to another one of Sloan's weird ways of describing things. "I'm not sure if I would say cursed, but the Long Night is just a holiday. Well, kind of. It's like a holiday and a season at the same time. It's when spiritual activity is at its most active, and because of a few

coincidences, people have been assuming it's also when bad things happen."

"Like earthquakes?"

"Earthquakes can happen any time," Calliope said. "Why don't we talk somewhere less out in the middle of the sidewalk? I'll drop my suitcase off and we can get a drink or something."

Sloan's helm eyes blinked a few times and she nodded. "I don't have much capital."

"I'll take care of it."

Sloan, not seeing many other options, shrugged and fell in step with Calliope, who weaved through the back alleys to a hotel for land dwellers. It had a little striped awning with a faded sign in the window and a few stories of tiny windows with unkempt flower boxes jutting from the sides.

Calliope motioned for Sloan to wait outside, and she disappeared into the building to check in, drop off her suitcase, and jog back down the stairs. Sloan stood, arms folded, eyes watching the throngs of people file through the alleyways, muttering to themselves.

A few nautipods caught her eye, but none were Bird-Helm, and she didn't have the time to try to push them into Ofae's waters now. One thing she did notice was that their gills were dripping with mucus, and they looked stuffy and bloated. Feverish and delirious as they were guided by friends.

"Why are nautipods and humans getting sick?" Sloan asked once Calliope was back at her side.

"I don't know," Calliope replied, sympathetic. "I'm not a doctor. But of all the Skireans species, they are the most susceptible to disease."

Sloan hummed and Calliope took this as an invitation to make her way to a cafe. In all honesty, she'd been feeling a gross lingering sense of dread since she first heard about the earthquakes, but chalked it up to the same feeling she always got when hearing of natural disasters. The overwhelming suffering of people often meant more wayward spirits, which meant more tingling in her horn and tugging from the displaced.

It also happened more often during the Long Night Season, and while she did think unfortunate circumstances were real, the apparition she

picked up a few months ago also displayed a heightened sense of dread, and Calliope didn't know what to make of that right now.

The cafe, a quaint little building, sat between two enormous apartment complexes, with a variety of sky bridges bonding the pair of abodes. It was empty save for a few huddled groups of gravenets, who were chattering away, though they lowered their voices when Calliope and Sloan entered.

"You can have whatever you want," Calliope said. "Figure it should be my treat while we discuss the terms of my helping you."

"I thought we've been through this already," Sloan replied, somewhat annoyed.

"That was before we ran into each other three separate times. That's a sign that we're going to be doing something together."

Sloan laughed. "And you think that means a contract?"

Calliope dipped her head. "I wouldn't say it like that. It's just, you know my intuition is pretty spot on. And my intuition tells me that spent every day getting nowhere on your own."

Sloan folded her arms and drummed her clawed fingers on the edge of her spiked pauldron. The metallic twang it made shuddered through the rest of her armor, and she looked Calliope up and down.

"I will take water," Sloan said finally, relenting.

Calliope flashed her best, most charming smile, and Sloan's lack of response made her wilt a little. She retrieved water and tea from the baristas, dropping a few extra crowns into the tip jar before sliding into a plush booth across from Sloan.

"Okay, so," Calliope started, typing up her tendrils and drooping ears behind her head with a sparkling hairband. "I remember you mentioning some things about this, uh, Bird-Helm, but I should probably start asking a few things formally."

Sloan stared at her blankly.

"It's so I can tune to the universe," Calliope added more defensively than she meant. "It's a process, and it works for me."

"Okay, then, ask."

"Well, if it's a person you're looking for, tell me about him. Everything you know." Calliope paused and stirred a few sugars into her tea. "The

kinds of places he goes, the people he likes to hang out with, any, uh, unusual activities he might participate in. As well as any aliases if those apply.”

Sloan went quiet for a long time, not touching her water. Calliope let her think, and got up a few times to refill her tea while she let Sloan ruminate. She wasn't in much of a rush either, as she wasn't going to be meeting Endymion, her other major client, for a few days.

“Bird-Helm is a nautipod from Ofae,” Sloan explained. “He is average for a nautipod. He never let me see him in any other form outside of his pod form, but he will be anywhere from five feet tall, to about five feet, eight inches tall based on what his elder told me.

”I have described him before, so I will not do so again. He is flighty, and craves attention from others like him. Those with power and influence, who can go where they please and do what they want. If they can fly, he will respect them. If they cannot, he might hang around anyway, especially since it does not appear many of your kind fly.

”He has a disdain for fine art, does not like getting too close to people, and leaves the moment someone tries to bridge the gap. He is blunt in his descriptions, and has an uncanny ability to hone in on the insecurities of others and take advantage of them.

”He hates snails, prefers small, colorful fish he can swallow in one bite, and is a thief. I do not know if he still does that here, but he is widely known where we're from to be untrustworthy and deceitful. It would not surprise me if he sought protection.”

Calliope nodded, once again sensing a deep hatred from Sloan despite no obvious physical signs to direct her. “Was it gang related?”

”I believe so.”

”Okay,” Calliope said. “Anything I should be cautious of? Is he violent?”

”He is unlikely to be violent.”

”Alright. I can work with this. In exchange for finding him, I want you to do me a favor when the time comes. I usually ask for some form of manual or magical labor.”

Sloan shrugged. “I can do that. But I will not kill anyone for you. My skills lay in capturing people alive and transporting them to other places.”

"Sounds good to me." Calliope stuck her hand out. "Then it's a deal. We can meet back here in a week and I'll let you know what's come up."

"So be it."