

Stonewing was quite the interesting place for a Nautipod of Sloan's stature. It was an information paradise because it turned out the little flying Crooks were actually a different thing entirely. Gravents they were called. Sloan had always thought they looked similar, especially when the wings were closed, but they couldn't have been more different.

Where Crooks were more prone to ignoring requests for information, Gravents were entirely too willing to spill their guts if prompted with the right questions. They especially loved it if you spent money in their establishments. Sloan was happy to do so. She'd been taking short detours to send any Nautipod she could back home and during those encounters, sometimes the Nautipods would give up their possessions, not understanding that they had nothing to fear by going to Ofae.

Sloan was deep into the bottles when the Gravent bartender came to clean up the stacks of cups.

"Got something on your mind today?" The Gravent asked, the metallic patches around its eyes crinkling in concern. "Tab's getting pretty high."

Sloan drained her cup, somewhat annoyed that she was being interrupted. She'd been piecing things together in her mind and the constant flow of Skirean Vice was making it easier for her to do so. Wet her internal gills and made it easier to breathe.

"I am to pay my tab at the end of my stay, yes?" Sloan asked, already knowing the answer. The edge on her voice made the Gravent hesitate. "Yes. I am trying to think, and if you are worried about theft, then you would have lost less drink if you'd said something earlier. Don't be brave now."

"Then you won't have any issue in settling what you have right now."

Sloan snorted and dropped a small bag on the table. It jingled loudly, fat and sagging with coin. The Gravent finally got the hint and brought over another bottle of Skirean Vice.

"My apologies," they said. "Can't be too careful."

"Do you do this to all your patrons?" Sloan asked. The edge was not gone, but nobody really worried about crimes unless it had actually happened. Was it possibly her Bird-Helm?

"No, but, uhm, I think I should probably keep most of my opinions to myself," the Gravent replied, clearly nervous. "I am an upstanding citizen, you know, never would pick anyone out like that unless I had a good reason. Not that I have a reason right now. I'm just taking extra precaution."

"My best friend's manager's son's favorite aunt - married into a human family if you can believe it - said she knew someone at her nail appointment that was dealing with a heist from not too long ago. Right here in Stonewing. Of course, never Inner Stonewing, but Outer? Near The Chain? Can't say I'm surprised."

"And ever since then, we've been trying to keep an eye on people who might want to try something." The Gravent puffed up, nerves still getting the better of them. "They get brave, you know. Braver. I mean, when something so prolific happens. Everyone's talking about it. Just being safe."

Sloan nodded along, occasionally drinking from her glass. "So the thief was a Nautipod?"

The Gravent barkeep confirmed it with a swift chirp. "Said they looked kinda weird. Not from around here. Definitely not from the lake, and we know what Nautipods from the lake are

like. In awe, but not like a human chick, like a fish out of water. No, this thief was not like that at all.”

Sloan finished the last bottle of Skirean Vice and spilled a pile of Crowns on the bar. They clattered noisily, but rearranged themselves into neat stacks with a wave of the barkeep’s hands.

”Where’s this chain?” Sloan asked. “I am done here.”

”It’s ‘The Chain’,” the Gravent barkeep corrected. “It’s on the other side of Outer Stonewing. By some old highways that the Dramasks use to move their equipment in and out of their workshops. I have a friend who lived there a few years ago, back when it was mostly where the workers lived.

”You can’t miss it, though. It’s the biggest chain that connects to the largest Stone Ring. There’s another bar right across the street from where The Chain connects. But you shouldn’t be going out there at night, you might get robbed if the thief decides to come back and take another one of them rocks.”

Sloan left the bar without another word. Sounded like she would be lucky if she ran into a thief. It just so happened that she was looking for one anyway, though she doubted this one would be Bird-Helm. Nobody in Stonewing seemed to be able to recall a Nautipod matching her description. They always seemed confused by the way she spoke and asked questions.

But, another thief might be able to answer her questions. At least clue her in on the whereabouts of others like them. Criminals had a way of networking that never made sense to her.

When she made it to The Chain, it was exactly as the Gravent barkeep had described. The largest columns of metal Sloan had ever seen, seemingly weightless and under a massive influx of magic. It connected to an equally massive link of metal higher and higher until it disappeared further into the atmosphere. Thick rolling clouds obscured the Stone Ring from view, but it gave her an odd sense of vertigo when she stared at it for too long.

Maybe the Skirean Vice was to blame, but she also got a really bad feeling about the neighborhood as well. Like a long echo of decay had been spreading through the city.

There were few people out and about, and the street lanterns were on, twinkling vaguely in the night. The air was cool, and Sloan shivered as the wind nipped at her exposed flesh. She felt like she was being watched.

She welcomed the thief, but would have preferred to be able to see them first. To confirm if it was Bird-Helm before she did anything else. There was no reason to pull out her whole arsenal on a random stranger, especially if she wasn’t even certain that her methods would work. There weren’t too many flying Nautipods to test such technology on.

As Sloan made her way through the neighborhood under the chain, another gust of wind blew through the streets, kicking up dust and tiny shards of metal. The metal grazed against her skin, and flecks of blood appeared.

The bar, she thought. She’d just make it to the bar and hunker down. Maybe the thief, if there really was one, would show up again. But if the nighttime air was this hostile, maybe they would think better of it.

She couldn’t imagine Bird-Helm willingly coming out to an abandoned industrial neighborhood just to fool around. And the presence of Ofea was very weak here. In fact, it was

almost completely eclipsed by a moving mass of indescribable fear lurking just under a layer or two of Eeridi's natural weave.

Something terrible had happened here.

It was almost enough to make Sloan turn back, but the bar was just at the end of a long corridor of old buildings. She made her way there, grunting with effort to not give into the unexplainable fear she felt. There was nobody around. No twisting shadows or monsters.

And even if there had been, Sloan was a well experienced fighter. She would have no problem defending herself given how many spikes jutted out from her, and how quick she could be if she applied herself. She just felt uneasy. And when she made it to the bar, she was actually surprised to see it open. It was mostly empty, and filled with odd metal art pieces and dimly blinking lights. The barkeep was another Gravent, this one looking old and tired.

Sloan sat at the bar. "Got Skirean Vice?"

"Only the most basic drink there is," the Gravent said, voice bored and condescending. "Why don't you try a real drink."

"Skirean Vice is fine," Sloan replied.

"I'm not saying you can't like it. It's just popular and bad. No real flavor. But that's what all the people want. Figures."

Despite their complaining, the Gravent served Sloan two bottles of the stuff.

"Heard you have a problem with a thief around here," Sloan said. She drank the Skirean Vice, which was watered down here and had a hint of dust filtering through it. "What do you know about that?"

"You some gunslinger here to ruin everyone's good time?" The Gravent replied, sniffing. "Talk of the town for fifteen seconds and suddenly everyone wants to be a hero. No one's gonna talk about you for longer than a minute and then you're old news just like everything else. You wanna be a glory hound, go off to Uto.

"Ain't no damn thief here. It's just regular people doing regular work and getting the short end of the stick. It's not a thief, it's an evil. It just swallows things up sometimes, and we been known this but you still come around looking for something.

"I hope that thing swallows up tryhards like you."

Sloan blinked. "Just keep the drinks coming, old man. I don't care about your little city. I'm just looking for a Nautipod."

"Damn stupid place to come looking for calamari. Your lot are in the lake. Surely you must have seen it before you took an air trolley up here. Can't miss it. Big as an ocean, land dweller. Try there."

"You always this mean?"

"Yes."

"Have you seen a Nautipod that has a bird helm? Dark gray and light blue. Flies."

"Nope, but you'll probably have a better time if you don't come looking for people who ain't have no business being here in the first place."

Sloan took a deep breath. "You couldn't be more right on that. Nautipods do not belong here."

"Smart," the Gravent replied, taking the empty bottles and replacing them. "One day someone's gonna fall and there won't be enough people to catch them is what I always say. More and more and more. What do they know? They think everything is for them."

Sloan returned into her mind, ignoring the mad ramblings of a Gravent with one foot in the grave. No thief, just an evil. That wasn't at all what she was looking for. And while Bird-Helm was a pain in the ass, pure evil is not what she would describe him as either. He was hers.

She spent the rest of the evening drinking and thinking, something that was becoming more of an exercise in futility than anything else. Especially at this bar, since the Gravent, emboldened by her agreeing with him on one single point, droned on and on about three hundred different things that Sloan didn't care about.

Nautipods did not belong in the lake either, they belonged on Ofae, though she neglected to add that part. The Skirean Vice, however, was tasting better, having come from actually cleaned glasses and new bottles. She wouldn't even hold it against this Gravent.

She didn't belong here and hadn't proven herself to be anything other than a nuisance. Maybe Crowns did solve all her problems. Would it have made sense to stop what she was doing and go gain more capital? Of course not.

But what she did know was that Stonewing, for whatever reason, was a cursed place, and that Bird-Helm was probably not here either, despite being the perfect candidate to live freely among the Songbirds.

"Barkeep," Sloan said, interrupting another diatribe that she hadn't been paying attention to. "If I acquired a phone, would you tell me if you see Bird-Helm? Or if any of your friends do?"

The barkeep, mid sentence, snapped their mouth shut. "I'm not some big mouth, land dweller. Find another bird to be your stooge."

That might have actually been a good idea. But probably not worth the time to go and do herself. More people meant more problems.