
Just Some Errands

“Baroness...”

“Sloane, please. After all, we went through some shit together to get here, Toren,” Sloane replied with a smile.

She looked around at the man’s office within Nornport’s Banking Guild. While he wasn’t the branch’s Guildmaster, he clearly had a lot of authority being a representative that Grandmaster Markus had empowered to expand Sloane’s Runecard system throughout the guild.

The telv smiled. “Of course, *Sloane*. I’m glad you met with me so quickly.”

“Well, if I’m going to be honest, I have a bunch of errands I wanted to accomplish today and needed to check on the status of my account first and foremost, but with you here, I also felt it prudent to meet with you. How have you been? I can’t imagine our escape and subsequent fights were something you have to do often in the guild.”

Toren laughed. “No, most assuredly not. But since you are here...” Toren leaned forward, steepling his fingers. “I’ve been going over the details of setting up the Runecard here. I believe it has great potential here in Nornport. Especially with the push from the Crown to adopt all things arcane.”

Sloane nodded, her fingers tapping lightly on the armrest of her chair. “I’m glad you think so. It’s been a labor of love, and I believe it can revolutionize the way we handle transactions.”

Toren’s eyes sparkled with interest. “Indeed. I’ve already started the process of integrating it here at the Nornport branch. There’s been some resistance, of course. Change always brings that. But I’m confident we can overcome it.”

Sloane raised an eyebrow. “Resistance? From whom?”

Toren sighed, rubbing his temples. “The older members, mostly. They’re set in their ways, afraid of anything new. My presence undermines the Guildmaster’s authority no matter what I do, if he is not receptive to change. But Grandmaster Markus has been pushing for modernization for years. Your Runecard is just the catalyst we needed.”

Sloane smirked. “Glad I could be of service. But remember, Toren, it’s not just about modernization. It’s about efficiency, security, and convenience.”

Toren nodded. “Of course. And I believe in its potential. That’s why I’m here to push it. Speaking of, we nearly have the pedestal ready. I was able to source the cores necessary. Since you are

actually present within the city, do you think you would be available to assist in its setup? We would of course secure your services at an appropriate consultation rate.”

Sloane hummed as she fell into thought.

Toren then shifted, his gaze searching Sloane’s. “How long do you plan to stay in the city?”

Sloane leaned back, her fingers playing with a strand of her hair. “Sorry, I was considering what all I would need to do it. I think I have time today actually... But as for your second question, we’ll be around for a while I suspect. I want to take Lord Estos up on his offer, establish a foothold here. Nornport is a gateway, and I intend to use it before heading to Calling. If there is already significant competition in the capital as I’ve heard, I intend to make Nornport the center of my own expansion.”

Toren’s lips curled into a smile. “Ambitious. I like it.”

Sloane smirked. “You have no idea.”

“I think I’m beginning to. Just remember, Sloane, Nornport is a city of opportunities, but it’s also a city of challenges. You’ll need allies.”

“I have them in you and Lord Estos. And I’ll make more. But for now, let’s focus on Runecard. I want it to be a success here.”

Toren nodded, his expression serious. “It will be. I’ll make sure of it.”

As they wrapped up their discussion, Toren stood, gesturing for Sloane to follow. They made their way through the guild, passing by numerous people who seemed to regard her with a critical eye. They walked through a large pair of steel reinforced doors and turned past the vault itself and made their way into a secure room where inside, a pedestal stood, waiting to be transformed into the heart of Nornport’s Runecard system. Boxes of supplies and tools were neatly stacked beside it, ready for the task ahead.

Before they could even begin their discussion, the door to the room opened with a soft creak, and in walked an elderly sun elf. His silvered hair was pulled back into a tight bun, and his robes, though finely made, bore an air of old-world conservatism. His sharp orange eyes immediately landed on Sloane, and his lips curled into a disdainful sneer.

“And who might this be, Mister Malsett?” he asked, his voice dripping with condescension.

“Guildmaster, may I present Baroness Sloane Reinhart? She’s the creator behind this system and a trusted acquaintance of the Grandmaster.”

Sloane, not one to be easily intimidated, extended her hand with grace. “Guildmaster, it’s a pleasure.”

The Guildmaster’s wrinkled gaze dropped to her outstretched hand, and he scoffed, making no move to reciprocate the gesture. “Mister Malsett, I’ve made it abundantly clear that we were not—”

Toren, cutting him off, raised a hand, his fingers splayed in a gesture of caution. “Guildmaster, while I hold your position in the highest regard, this matter isn’t open for debate. Adaptation is the key to our future. You can either embrace this change or, regretfully, step aside for someone who will.”

Sloane's eyes remained fixed on the Guildmaster, as she watched for his reaction.

This is definitely a political dance, and I'm right in the middle of it.

The Guildmaster's eyes narrowed and the room's atmosphere grew thick with the tension, the silence only broken by the distant murmur of voices from the hallway outside.

For a moment, Sloane wondered if the Guildmaster would explode in anger. Instead, he took a deep breath, his chest rising and falling beneath his ornate robes. “Mister Malsett,” he began, his voice icy, “I have dedicated decades to this Guild. I have seen it rise from obscurity to the powerhouse it is today. And you dare to insinuate that I am now an obstacle to its progress? I do not need Markus’s lapdog to tell me how to do my job.”

Toren's posture remained relaxed, but there was a steeliness in his eyes. “It’s not about your past contributions, Guildmaster. It’s about the future. The world is changing. It *has* changed since the Flash, and we must change with it. Baroness Reinhart’s system is revolutionary. It’s the way forward.”

Sloane, sensing an opportunity to mediate, stepped forward. “Guildmaster, I understand your reservations. Change is never easy, especially when traditions run deep. But this isn’t about discarding the past. It’s about building upon it. Let’s work together to ensure the Banking Guild remains a powerful entity that can stand at the forefront of innovation.”

The Guildmaster’s gaze shifted between Toren and Sloane, assessing, calculating. Finally, he sighed, the weight of the situation evident in the sound. “Very well,” he conceded, “I will give this... system a chance. But I expect to be kept in the loop at every stage.”

“Of course, Guildmaster. Transparency is key. After all, you’ll need to oversee your branch and ensure the processes are running optimally for the most effective fielding. Let me be clear, I am here as an advisor to ensure this system is set up, no more. I will not get in your way anymore than that. The guild as a whole stands to do nothing but benefit from this.”

The older elf glanced at the pedestal and the supplies. “Then let’s begin. Show me how this works.”

Sloane reached into her satchel and pulled out her own Runecard while Toren removed the management card that would be associated with this pedestal.

Sloane smiled, filled with confidence as she got to work on something she enjoyed.

“With pleasure, Guildmaster.”



Emerging from the guild's backroom, Sloane found Stefan, Mariel, and Nemura waiting, their postures relaxed but alert. With a subtle nod, she signaled them to move, and the trio began their exit. The guild's grand entrance opened up to the bustling streets of Nornport, and as they stepped into the daylight, Sloane murmured, "Vesper, you can come out now."

In an instant, Vesper materialized, its sudden appearance startling several bystanders. Among them was a city guard, who, caught off-guard, instinctively retreated a step, unsheathing his blade. His eyes, wide with a mix of fear and surprise, darted over Vesper's intricate design and massive feline form.

"By the gods, what is that monstrosity?" he exclaimed, his voice edged with panic.

Vesper, in a display of unexpected theatricality, yawned expansively, stretching out as if waking from a long nap.

She's really leaning into this whole dramatic entrance thing.

Mariel stepped forward, her hands raised in a placating gesture. "It's alright, sir. Vesper is a protector, not an aggressor. We mean no harm."

Nemura, however, took a more tactical approach. She positioned herself as a barrier between the jittery guard and Sloane, her eyes locked onto his weapon, ready to intervene if necessary.

The guard hesitated, his eyes darting between the golem, Sloane, and the others.

The surrounding crowd's murmurs grew in volume, a cacophony of whispers, questions, and speculations. Some, driven by curiosity, edged closer to get a better look at Vesper, while others retreated, their faces etched with apprehension.

A second figure, clad in ornate armor that distinguished him as someone of rank, pushed through the gathering crowd. "What's causing this ruckus?" he demanded, his gaze immediately locking onto Vesper.

Definitely not just a guard. A knight, perhaps?

Before the first guard could respond, Sloane stepped forward. "Ser, my apologies for the disturbance. This is Vesper, my golem. She's here for my protection and means no harm to anyone."

The knight's gaze sharpened with curiosity. "You were permitted entry into the city with such a... unique companion?" He motioned towards Vesper.

"Yes, a guard captain asked a few questions then let us in. I believe I will go to the Arcanum."

Recognition flashed in the knight's eyes. "Ah, so you're seeking an audience with Lady Maxwell. I've heard she has a penchant for the arcane and unusual."

“Lady Maxwell?”

The knight blinked, momentarily taken aback. “She’s the terran appointed by the king as his Lead Advisor on Magical Affairs.”

A terran? That’s unexpected.

“The captain did mention something about a great project, but he didn’t want to ruin the surprise as it were,” Sloane admitted. “Have you met her?”

He chuckled, a deep sound that resonated in the air. “She’s definitely the one in charge of that. But no, I haven’t met her. Not personally, but my liege speaks of her. Says she’s quite the character.” He then addressed the guard, his tone firm but not unkind. “Stand down, guardsman. All is well.”

The guard, still eyeing Vesper warily, nodded and retreated. The knight turned back to Sloane, extending a hand. “Ser Gerrald, at your service.”

Sloane accepted the gesture. “Baroness Sloane Reinhart.”

He inclined his head respectfully. “An honor, milady. From which lands do you hail?” He paused, a hint of embarrassment coloring his cheeks. “Forgive me, that was thoughtless. You’re one of the Displaced.”

Sloane waved off his concern with a light chuckle. “No offense taken. My peerage is from Blightwych.”

His nod was one of acknowledgment. “Ah, Blighters. Sturdy folk. I don’t want to keep you here while I ramble. I see that your guards are a bit anxious to leave this crowded area with all of the attention,” he said with a chuckle. “But it’s not every day one gets to meet one of your people, and I must say after all Lady Maxwell has done for us, I find myself quite intrigued. If you’re headed somewhere, might I accompany you?”

I think I really need to meet this Lady Maxwell person.

She smiled, appreciating his courteous demeanor. “Of course. We’re returning to our inn. The Ivory Rose.”

“Good choice that.”

As they navigated the streets, Vesper drew many curious and wary glances. Mariel, in a display of youthful protectiveness, walked close to the golem, as if shielding it from potential threats. The sight was endearing, and Sloane had to suppress a smile.

Vesper would be completely fine on her own, though.

Nemura shadowed Sloane, her gaze darting between Gerrald and their surroundings, ready for any sign of trouble while Stefan walked a bit behind, trailing them at a comfortable distance while ensuring no one did anything with Vesper on full display.

Gerrald, attempting to make conversation, inquired, "So, you've come to Nornport for business before attending the Arcanum's Conclave of Magic?"

Sloane exhaled slowly, her thoughts gathering. "To be honest, Ser Gerrald, I only learned of the Arcanum recently. But it piqued my interest, and we have matters to attend to in Calling anyway, so I figured I'd check it out."

She looked around while the group made their way back to the inn, occasionally glancing at the buildings and the people they passed. The streets of Nornport were bustling, filled with merchants peddling their wares, children playing, and the general hum of a city alive with activity. The architecture was a mix of old and new, with stone buildings standing tall next to more modern wooden structures.

"Calling is a fascinating place," Gerrald mused, breaking the silence. "The king has turned it into a hub of magic and knowledge. The Arcanum's Conclave will be a gathering of the brightest minds in the realm and beyond to really delve into the Great Change. I hear the Church will be presenting their own findings from the east. Apparently a magic wielder of great power has made vast discoveries in the field in the Kingdom of Avira. But the Crown is not deterred, they want to show that Rosale is the center of magic on Ikios, not Avira."

That definitely drew her interest. It seemed there were plenty of opportunities abound. Now she just needed to get settled in and see if she could find out any information about terran sightings in the city. After that... Well, it was time to figure out her path.

"Then I will look forward to it. Magic has always been a subject that has captivated me since arriving in your world."

Gerrald chuckled. "Then you're in for a treat. The First Conclave will be a grand spectacle that will turn the entire city into a place of wonder and faire. A way to take the minds of the masses away from the ails that plague our lands. And with Lady Maxwell at the helm, it's bound to be... unique."

The group continued their journey, the streets gradually becoming less crowded as they approached the inn.

As they reached the entrance, Ser Gerrald paused, turning to Sloane. "It's been a pleasure, Baroness. If you're interested, my liege would be quite keen to meet you. She's always had a fascination with terrans and their unique perspective."

Sloane raised an eyebrow, a playful smirk on her lips. “Is this just an excuse for you to meet with me again?”

He laughed heartily, the sound echoing in the street. “Guilty as charged. But I assure you, my liege is genuinely interested.”

Sloane's smile widened. “I'd be honored to meet her, and I would love to find out more about other terrans that have passed through the city or are even still around.”

With a final nod, Ser Gerrald departed, leaving Sloane and her group at the entrance of the inn. As they walked inside, the luxurious but inviting atmosphere of the place enveloped them.

At least it was inviting until the other patrons literally lifted their noses at them.

Or rather, they did until they saw Vesper, then they walked away *very* quickly.

The sight was very amusing.

Sloane gestured for Stefan to come closer. Leaning in, she whispered, “I need you to find out everything you can about Gerrald's liege. And while you're at it, dig deeper into Lord Estos. If we're going to be in business with him, I want to know everything. Then, take yourself to get some new clothing in the House colors.”

Stefan chuckled, his eyes gleaming with mischief. “Thought I'd get a break in Nornport, but I'm always up for some sleuthing. It'll be like old times. I'll let you know if I need any distractions.” His stomach gave a loud rumble, causing him to grimace. “After some food, perhaps?”

Nemura, overhearing the exchange, snorted with amusement. “His stomach is right. Let's eat.”



Lunch had been relaxing, a moment filled with laughter and light conversation. The food was delicious, and the company was even better. Nemura and Stefan had really come to be comfortable with her and she enjoyed chatting with them. With Gisele and the other knights gone, it felt good to have people she could talk and relax with.

Now, back in the comfort of her suite, Sloane felt a sense of calm wash over her. The room was spacious, adorned with rich tapestries and plush furnishings. The large windows let in a soft, golden light, casting a warm glow over everything.

After lunch, they'd all split to their own devices. Stefan went to carry out the task she had for him, while Nemura was going to a blacksmith to look into new armor.

Sloane needed the woman to look like a knight, even if in reality the former Empire's Fist only wanted to be a woman-at-arms at most.

I bet I can convince her.

Or I can just do it and beg forgiveness after.

Mariel sat beside her, engrossed in a book. The young girl's eyes darted across the pages, absorbing every word with rapt attention. Every so often, she'd glance up at Sloane, a look of admiration in her eyes.

Vesper sat on Sloane's other side. The golem's gaze was fixed on Tiberius, the mechanical falcon that rested on the table in his damaged state.

Taking a deep breath, Sloane picked up her engraving pen. The weight of it felt familiar, comforting. She closed her eyes for a moment, drawing on her mana. The energy coursed through her, filling her with a sense of purpose.

She used her **[Artificer's Insight]**, causing the world around her to shift slightly. Every detail became clearer, every flaw more evident. The spell granted her an enhanced understanding of the materials and mechanisms before her.

With a steady hand, she began her work. Her **[Runic Knowledge]** guided her, each stroke precise and deliberate. The runes glowed softly as she refreshed them, their power rejuvenated.

She then turned her attention to the damaged parts, her fingers deftly manipulating the metal. The alteration magic she employed helped to speed along the **[Repair]** function of the falcon and mended the damage, erasing any trace of the cultist paladin's assault.

Hours seemed to pass in mere moments. By the time she was done, Tiberius looked as good as new, its form pristine and its power restored.

Sloane leaned back, a satisfied smile on her face.

But then she frowned.

Tiberius wasn't moving.

What? Why not?

She stood up and stepped closer, checking to make sure all of the runes were good, the gems weren't damaged. The core was steadily glowing, but why...

Oh. I know.

Sloane gently reached out and placed her fingers on the blue core. She took a deep breath and with a deep pull of mana, she forced it into the core.

Oxylus

The room around Sloane seemed to dissolve, the familiar surroundings of her suite replaced by an endless expanse of swirling smoke. The void was vast, its depths immeasurable, and she felt a momentary sense of vertigo as she tried to find her bearings.

The last time she'd been here, she had been unprepared, caught off guard by the sudden transition before easily settling into its *right*-ness. But this time, she had a semblance of what to expect. She took a deep breath.

Focus, Sloane. You've been here before.

She instantly looked around, trying to see through the smoke for Tiberius.

But there was no sign of him, nor the sound of his wings.

Then, in the distance, a faint light beckoned. Drawn to it, Sloane began to move, her steps echoing softly in the void. As she approached, the light grew brighter, revealing a pedestal with a blue core sitting on it.

The core pulsed with energy, its rhythmic glow casting dancing shadows across the void. Sloane reached out, her fingers brushing against its surface. The moment she made contact, a rush of memories flooded her mind.

She saw herself, deep in a tea-induced fugue, working tirelessly on Tiberius, pouring her heart and soul into the creation. She saw herself touching his core followed by the bird coming to life before she stumbled to bed.

Tiberius had stayed with her for hours, watching worriedly as she was passed out. Then she woke up and freaked the hell out when he was perched on her chest.

The memories flew by, Tiberius always watching over her, spending time with Maud, and then Mariel. How it was with Stefan while she was jailed in Swanbrook.

Then she saw the attack in the forest. Felt his fear as the cultist paladin cast a spell at her, then felt the damage be inflicted on Tiberius. Saw the despair in her own eyes as he fell.

The weight of those memories threatened to pull her under, but Sloane fought back, refusing to be consumed by the past. She needed to focus on the present, on bringing Tiberius back. The core continued to pulse as if syncing with her own heartbeat.

Come on, Tiberius. Come back to me.

She pushed more mana into the core, willing the falcon to awaken. The void around her began to swirl, the smoke thickening and obscuring her vision. But she didn't let go, her fingers firmly pressed against the core, her determination unwavering.

Suddenly, a gust of wind blew through the void, clearing the smoke. Before her stood Tiberius, his mechanical form gleaming in the dim light. His onyx eyes, once dim, now glowed with a soft blue hue. He spread his wings, letting out a soft chirp, a sound of recognition.

“Tiberius,” she whispered, reaching out to touch him and the falcon nuzzled her hand.

The void around them began to fade, the swirling smoke dissipating. Sloane felt a gentle tug, pulling her back to reality. She blinked, the familiar surroundings of her suite coming into focus.

Mariel rushed to Sloane's side, concern evident in her eyes. “Sloane! Are you alright?” Then her head swiveled as movement caught her attention. “Tiberius!” she exclaimed, rushing over to embrace the falcon who chirped excitedly at the young rai the girl.

Vesper tilted her head, studying the bird with a curious gaze.

Sloane let out a sigh of relief, her fingers brushing against Tiberius's feathers. “Welcome back,” she whispered, her voice filled with emotion.

“Wrryaaatt!”

“Yes, yes. I missed you too.”



Sloane lounged on a plush chair, engaging in light banter with Mariel. Tiberius nestled comfortably in the young girl's embrace, occasionally chirping in response to their conversation and Vesper lounged lazily on the rug in front of the fireplace.

A knock at the door interrupted their chatter. Sloane's gaze met Mariel's. “Stay alert,” she murmured, her voice low and cautionary. Mariel's grip on Tiberius tightened, her eyes sharp and attentive.

With a gesture, Vesper quickly closed behind her as Sloane approached the door. She inhaled deeply, drawing mana into herself, preparing to unleash her [Mana Bolt] spell if the situation demanded it. As she opened the door, her eyes were immediately drawn to an unexpected sight: a generous expanse of cleavage.

She blinked, momentarily disarmed.

A throaty chuckle broke the brief silence. “My eyes are up here, you know,” Nemura teased.

Sloane's gaze snapped up to a pair of golden eyes, her cheeks warming slightly. “Nemura? What in the world...?”

The tall, copper-haired telv stood before her, her usual armor replaced with a rather revealing ensemble. The white blouse she wore was barely held together, threatening to spill its contents with any sudden movement. Paired with tight black pants and calf-high leather boots, the outfit's only hint that it belonged to Nemura was with her signature sword and dagger.

Nemura's laughter filled the room as she stepped inside. "You should see your face, Sloane." Her amusement was cut short by Tiberius's chirp of recognition. "Tiberius! You fixed him!" Her focus darted back to Sloane, a mix of surprise and admiration.

Sloane grinned, pride evident in her eyes. "I did. But back to," she waved her hand at Nemura's chest. "Why are you dressed like that? You never dress like that."

Nemura smirked, her posture relaxed. "Isn't it obvious? I had to strip down for measurements at the blacksmith's. They don't exactly have ready-made armor for someone of my... stature."

Sloane raised an eyebrow. "And you couldn't put your clothes back on because...?"

Nemura shrugged, her grin unabashed. "I'm certainly wearing clothes. But, on a serious note, I thought we were going shopping. Figured I'd need some appropriate attire if I'm to play the part of a knight."

Mariel's giggles punctuated the room. "You certainly look dashing. I imagine all of the noblemen would be smitten if they saw you now, Ser Nemura."

Nemura shot her a playful glare. "Watch it, young one. Save that sass for Stefan."

Mariel saluted, her face mock-serious. "Duly noted, Ser."

The telv scowled, and the priestess-in-training was completely undeterred.

Sloane chuckled, shaking her head. "Alright, alright. Does this mean you're ready to go, Nemura?"

Nemura winked, adjusting her blouse just enough to elicit another eye roll from Sloane. "Always am, boss."

"You did this on purpose."

"Yup."

Mariel, trying to suppress her giggles, looked between the two women, clearly amused by their banter. The girl then let out a contented sigh as she got up and grabbed her satchel, slipping it over her head. "I'm ready."

Sloane nodded and Nemura opened the door for them.

With Vesper silently moving at Sloane's side and Tiberius perched regally on Nemura's shoulder, the group made their way to the entrance of the inn. As the door swung open, a gentle breeze greeted them.

"Probably a good thing we're not going anywhere anytime soon, Sloane," Nemura said as the group stepped out of the inn and onto the cobblestone streets of Nornport's noble quarter. The sun was out with no cloud cover, the red orb trying its hardest to warm up the chilled air.

"Why's that?"

"Winter will be here soon, and I think it'll be best if we get stuck here rather than anywhere else along the way."

The main street stretched out before them, lined with a myriad of boutiques. Each shop had ornate windows showcasing their finest wares, from silken gowns to handcrafted jewelry. The soft hum of conversation, the clatter of horse hooves, and the distant strumming of a lute created a lively symphony, capturing the essence of the city's vibrant atmosphere.

People of all varieties were out and about, but sun elves were by and large the majority of the people within the city. She swept her gaze over the cityfolk going about their days, seeing one high elf woman staring at Vesper with wide eyes. She seemed a bit out of place within the district, giving a distinctly professional or scholarly vibe—which probably explained the fascination on the woman's face for the golem.

It annoyed her.

Sloane could have sworn she'd seen the woman somewhere before.

"You're right," Sloane said as she ignored the staring that Vesper garnered. "It's not bad here. I just wish they would stop staring."

Mariel laid her hand gently on Vesper as they walked. "That's because our big kitty is so fascinating. Aren't you? Are you the most amazing kitty ever?"

Let out a throaty meow.

Sloane was affronted.

"Vesper is a weapon of mass destruction. Not a kitty." She really wanted to hammer home that point. The golem was made for killing, not for cuddling.

A cuddly golem could come later.

Like after she found Gwyn.

Would Gwyn like a cuddly golem? Do people even keep pets here? I... I actually don't think I've seen any.

Mariel leaned close to the golem. “Don’t let that mean baroness get to you. You’re always gonna be a cute kitty to me.”

Vesper *purred*.

Sloane’s thoughts of pets vanished.

They made their way to a particularly grand boutique, its sign depicting a needle and thread intertwined with a golden laurel. As they entered, the scent of fresh linen and lavender greeted them. The shop was spacious, with racks of clothing organized by type and color. A middle-aged sun elf woman with graying hair and a tape measure draped around her neck approached them with a welcoming smile but eyes that gave silent judgment that Sloane knew was internally scathing.

“Good day, miladies. How may we assist you today?” she inquired.

Sloane smiled and channeled haughty *Lady* Ismeld, not the snap-you-in-two *Ser* Ismeld.

“My retinue and I recently arrived from Swanbrook after narrowly avoiding all that nasty business there. Unfortunately, due to circumstances utterly out of our control, we find ourselves without an adequate wardrobe. Myself, my knight, and my ward all need clothing befitting our status, but preferably within styles that are trending within Rosale or even Nornport in particular, if that is appropriate.”

The woman looked positively stricken. “My dear, I mean, My Lady. I am so sorry for what you must have gone through. Yes, yes. I can absolutely assist you.” She looked up... and up... at Nemura. “You need clothing for your knight?”

Nemura stepped forward, her eyes scanning the display pieces. “Greetings madame. I’m in need of casual, formal, and light duty attire that compliments the colors of milady’s House. I have new armor being crafted as we speak, but one cannot wear armor in all settings. I need items that are both functional and presentable.”

The woman smiled. “If you do not mind, I have a pair of apprentices that would absolutely love to assist you with what you need. A fine project.”

Nemura smiled. “I am in your care.”

The shopkeeper nodded, passing Nemura off to two young sun elves that promptly took the tall woman to another room. As Nemura was being measured and fitted, Sloane browsed through the racks, her fingers brushing against the soft fabrics.

After being measured, she eventually settled on a pair of comfortable pants, a knee-length robe with intricate embroidery, and a few dress patterns that caught her eye. She also picked out some riding pants and clothes suitable for travel. The woman would have it all ready within a couple days, but Sloane was able to wear the robe immediately. Sloane thought it looked very mage-like.

Definitely not wizard robes. But now that I think about it... I could use some armor too...

Mariel, meanwhile, was drawn to a booklet of dress patterns designed for young noblewomen. She chose a few traveling dresses in muted colors, along with riding clothes that were both practical and stylish.

Once they were finished, all moved back to the front, Nemura leaned against a counter, her gaze thoughtful. “You know, Sloane. I haven’t thanked you for all of this before. So, thank you.”

Sloane nodded, adjusting the robe she had decided to purchase. “Of course. You are a part of my House. You need to look the part. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

As the shopkeeper moved to tally up their purchases, Sloane lowered her voice, “We need to start scouting for potential allies and find a suitable place to set up. I know Toren and Ilian will help, but still... We have enough funds to purchase a property, but nothing as grand as the one in Marketbol.”

Mariel chimed in, “What about the temple? Maybe they have priests who’d be interested in a scholarly position. You do have the instructions for the Ceremony of Paths from Praetor Shalas.”

Sloane winced, her expression conflicted. “Given the current state of the Church, I’m not sure that’s the best idea right now. But I promise I’ll consider it.”

Mariel gave a small nod, her disappointment evident. “I understand. Just thought it might be worth exploring.”

Their conversation quieted as the sun elf shopkeeper returned and presented Sloane with the bill, her delicate fingers holding the parchment with practiced grace. Sloane, without hesitation, produced her ruby banking guild badge, resisting the urge to slap it down on the countertop. The gleam of the precious stone caught the ambient light, drawing the elf’s attention. As she recognized the emblem, her eyes widened, and a predictable soft gasp escaped her lips.

With newfound deference, the shopkeeper hastened the transaction, ensuring that every item would be delivered directly to their inn posthaste.

“Your items will be sent over promptly, My Lady,” she said, her voice carrying a hint of awe.

Sloane nodded, offering a polite smile. “Thank you for your assistance.”

She could definitely get behind that level of service, and even said they would be back as needed, much to the woman’s happiness.

Exiting the boutique, the trio briskly navigated the streets, with Vesper’s looming presence ensuring they faced no obstructions. The familiar facade of their inn soon came into view.

Upon entering, Sloane’s gaze was immediately drawn to a high elf woman seated in the lounge area—the same she’d seen walking down the street. The woman’s posture was one of anticipation, and

as their eyes met, she rose gracefully from her chair. Her movements were fluid, but there was a hint of urgency in her stride.

Nemura swiftly positioned herself between Sloane and the approaching elf. But the woman, undeterred, tried to peek around Nemura's imposing frame.

"Hello," she began, her voice carrying a note of desperation. "I... your metal creations are utterly fascinating. I would really like to discuss them with you and I believe our interests might align."

Sloane's eyes narrowed, her curiosity piqued but her guard still up. "And you are?"

The woman seemed momentarily flustered, as if she wasn't accustomed to direct interactions. "Oh, apologies. Formalities were Aredd's thing. My name is Aila Iliric. I'm a researcher, and I am... Well, I was part of a team that uncovered the true nature of mana." She winced slightly, hinting at a deeper story behind her words.