
A Brief Respite

Sloane sat in the workshop, meticulously inspecting her new golem for any potential issues with her runework or any mechanical discrepancies, and so far, everything appeared to be in perfect order.

Which made her extremely happy.

Vesper emitted her eerie purring sound as Sloane closed the panel that housed the two cores within the displacer beast's chest, using her magic to seal it securely.

Her huge golem had kept to the workshop over the past week, and Sloane had asked Ilian and the servants who attended her to keep her presence a secret, which wasn't difficult when she had the golem use its ability to conceal its presence whenever someone entered.

She had tested how long Vesper could maintain the almost complete invisibility and had been pleasantly surprised that it lasted a solid half an hour.

For his part, Tiberius appeared to love Vesper and Sloane found the falcon often perching on the displacer beast's shoulder and trying to look as menacing as the thing it rode.

Sloane ran her hand over the smooth metal of Vesper's flank, her fingers tracing the intricate runework she'd etched into the surface with the help of her **[Runic Knowledge]**. "Everything's looking good, Vesper," she said, her voice soft but filled with a sense of pride. "But we need to keep you hidden until the time is right."

Vesper responded with a low growl, the sound vibrating through the room. The golem's six onyx eyes glowed faintly, reflecting the dim light in the workshop. Sloane couldn't help but feel a sense of anticipation at the thought of unleashing Vesper on the cultists.

"Yes," she agreed, her gaze meeting the golem's. "You'll be a surprise for the cultists. They won't know what hit them." She gave a small chuckle, her hand resting on the golem's head. "Just remember, protecting who we hold dear is more important than the hunt."

Vesper's growl softened, almost as if the golem understood her words. Sloane couldn't help but smile, a sense of accomplishment washing over her. She had created something truly remarkable, something that could potentially turn the tide in their favor.

Sloane returned to her workbench, her gaze falling on the next project she had lined up. It was a small necklace, one that would be suitable for a young girl. She picked it up, her fingers tracing over the delicate silver rope cord and the polished obsidian pendant that hung from it. The pendant was embellished with diamonds and black diamonds, and a single opal was set in the

center at the bottom. It was a beautiful piece, one that she hoped would bring a smile to the face of its recipient, but one that brought the mother a deep longing for her daughter.

Even just finding out that she was safe somewhere would mean the world.

In between her other work, Sloane had been going through the gemstones provided by Lord Estos, studying their properties and learning how to best utilize them in her work. She had discovered that some gems, like the obsidian in the pendant, seemed to have a connection with two domains. This was a fascinating revelation, one that opened up new possibilities for her creations.

With a determined look, Sloane picked up her enchanting pen and checked to ensure it was filled with enough enchanting ink. She then turned her attention back to the necklace, her mind already working on the runes she would need to etch into it. Drawing heavily on her [**Runic Knowledge**] trait, she began to etch a runic chain into the pendant. This chain would connect to the user and draw upon their [**Black**] mana. The diamonds in the pendant would then help to [**Amplify**] and [**Strengthen**] the things the user could summon.

As she worked, the world around her seemed to fade away, leaving only her and the necklace as Sloane found herself falling into a rhythm, her movements precise and methodical thanks to her [**Artificer's Insight**]. She could feel the magic flowing through her, guiding her hand as she etched each rune. It was a feeling she had come to love, one that filled her with a sense of purpose and satisfaction.

Bells signaled the passing hours as Sloane worked, her focus never wavering. By the time she finished, the necklace was transformed. The runes were etched into the pendant, their intricate patterns glowing faintly with magic as she held it up, admiring her work.

It was perfect, just as she had envisioned, and she hoped Mariel liked it.

Sloane held it up, admiring her work. "What do you think?" she asked, turning to her mechanical companions. Tiberius, her mechanical falcon, tilted his head curiously, while Vesper, the newly created panther slash displacer beast golem, gave an approving nod. A smile spread across the Artificer's face at their reactions.

I wonder what golem I can make next.

Her mind started racing as she considered what could be needed. Tiberius gave her situational awareness and scouting.

Vesper provided surgical strikes.

They are so... lifelike.

She wondered what an actual humanoid golem would be like, and if it would develop similarly.

Would it develop true sapience? What are the ethics of that?

Her gaze drifted toward the clasp on her cloak and its... draconic appearance.

No...

Maybe?

A knock echoed through the workshop, drawing Sloane's attention away from her thoughts and toward the opening door that revealed Nemura, clad in her armor. The sight was a stark reminder of the constant threat they were under, but also made Sloane reach down and adjust her own breastplate.

They hadn't been attacked since moving onto the estate which ensured that they were all on edge, always prepared for the worst.

"Dining hall is set up," Nemura announced, her gaze flicking to the golem. A hint of something flashed in her eyes, but whatever her thoughts, her copper-haired Amazon of a guard quickly masked it.

With a nod, Sloane reached over and grabbed a small case, and placed the necklace inside before turning around.

She patted Vesper's flank. "Stay hidden, okay?" she instructed the golem. At her words, Vesper let out a soft meow, the sound eerily similar to a real cat. Sloane turned to her falcon. "And you, it's time for a bit of fun."

Tiberius let out a chirp and flew over to Sloane, landing on the leather pauldron she had made just for him to sit on.

As she followed Nemura out of the workshop, she heard the telv woman mutter, "That thing is developing quicker than Tiberius did."

Tiberius's head jerked towards Nemura and he let out an indignant screech, causing Sloane to burst into laughter, the sound echoing through the hallway as they made their way to the dining hall.

As Sloane and Nemura entered the dining hall, they were greeted by the sight of a room transformed. The hall was adorned with fine decorations, the table set with gleaming silverware and crystal glasses. Yemina was already there, engaged in conversation with Lord Estos. The sun elf nobleman turned as they approached, a warm smile on his face.

"Sloane, a pleasure as always," he greeted, his eyes twinkling with genuine warmth. "I trust you are well?"

Sloane nodded, returning his smile. "I am, thank you, Ilian."

His eyes glanced down at her armored chest, and he raised a brow. “Surely you can part with your armor on the grounds? I could have a dress delivered to your room that would complement you well.”

“With the cultists still at large, I felt it safest to remain prepared at all times,” she responded carefully. “With respect to your House Guard, of course.”

He nodded with understanding. “Of course. After dinner, I would ask you to join me for a small meeting. Your knight should join us. I have news.”

Sloane’s eyes widened. “You found us a ride?”

His eyes filled with amusement. “A ride,” he echoed with a chuckle. “Yes, we will talk.”

She nodded as a servant stepped forward, her hands outstretched. “May I take your gift, Baroness?” she asked, her gaze falling on the small case in Sloane’s hand. Sloane handed it over, watching as the servant carefully placed it on a small table that held a modest collection of gifts.

The sound of the door opening drew their attention, and Sloane turned to see Stefan and Mariel entering the room. Stefan looked dashing in his new dark leather armor, happy that the glow of the runes was properly hidden on the backside, while Mariel was dressed in a simple traveling dress that did little to reveal her affiliation with the temple. The young girl’s eyes widened as she took in the scene, a smile spreading across her face as she spotted Sloane.

Or rather, Tiberius.

“Tib!” she called out, raising her arm. Tiberius let out a happy screech, taking flight and landing on Mariel’s outstretched arm before the two made their way toward Sloane.

“Happy birthday, Mariel,” she said, causing the girl’s smile to widen.

“Thank you, Sloane!” Mariel replied, her eyes shining with excitement.

Lord Estos laughed, his gaze shifting to the table laden with food. “I hope my chefs have prepared a suitable feast for this auspicious day, young Mariel,” he said, his voice filled with mirth. “But first, come! You may sit in my seat at the head of the table while we bedazzle you with our gifts.”

Sloane smiled as the girl’s expression brightened further while being led by a servant girl to the high-back chair at the end of the table.

Once Mariel was seated, her eyes wide with anticipation, everyone began to present their gifts one at a time. Lord Estos was the first, presenting her with a set of earrings. They were three small silver loops designed to adorn her pointed ears, and a single pair for her lobes that featured a dangling, polished light blue gemstone that held a beautiful cat’s eye effect. Sloane’s eyes widened at

the sight of the beautiful stones, their iridescent sheen reflecting the light in a mesmerizing display of colors.

“While these earrings may not be magical as what Lady Reinhart can create,” Ilian explained. “I have heard that gemstones can be imbued with magic. To represent your connection with Tenera, I chose the rare moonstone.”

Mariel held them up, her eyes sparkling with delight. “They’re beautiful, thank you, Lord Estos!” she exclaimed. She turned to Sloane, her curiosity piqued. “What kind of magic could they use?”

Sloane asked politely if she could examine the earrings, and Sloane extended her hand, her fingers gently closing around the earring as Mariel passed it to her. The cool metal and smooth gemstone felt comforting in her hand as she rolled it through her fingers while she took a moment to center herself, her eyes closing as she focused on the earring in her hand.

Slowly, she began to channel her mana, the familiar sensation of energy flowing from her core and into her hand where it touched the gem. It was a delicate process, like threading a needle, as she carefully pushed her mana into the gemstone and instantly she could feel the resistance as if the stone had a natural barrier against foreign energy, but she persisted, drawing on her [**Artificer’s Insight**] to help.

As her mana finally bypassed the barrier and seeped into the moonstone, she felt a shift, a subtle change in the stone’s energy. Her eyes snapped open, her gaze locked onto the earring as knowledge brought by her Artifice filled her and a realization dawned on her. The moonstone, when imbued with mana, could provide a shield against divination and scrying magic.

It was a protective charm, a safeguard against prying eyes and intrusive magic.

She shared her discovery with the others, and the lord wasn’t the only one interested in the find.

As she handed the earring back to Mariel, she noticed Yemina and Nemura sharing a look. The paladin turned to Lord Estos, her tone serious. “Do you have any more of these gemstones?”

The sun elf shook his head. “I’m afraid not. Moonstones are quite rare in this region.”

Sloane raised a brow, looking between Yemina and Nemura. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“We’ll explain later,” Nemura replied, her gaze lingering on the moonstone earrings and Sloane couldn’t shake the feeling that something significant had just occurred.

As the gift-giving continued, each present was met with Mariel’s wide-eyed wonder and genuine gratitude. Stefan presented her with a finely crafted dagger, its hilt adorned with intricate

designs. The blade was small, perfect for a girl Mariel's age, and Stefan explained that it was more for self-defense than anything else.

Yemina gave the girl a satchel and a thin tome, whispering something in the girl's ear before stepping away. The young girl looked down at the leatherbound book with reverence and quickly nodded to the paladin while sliding it safely into the new pack that she slid over her head and settled onto her shoulder.

Nemura's gift was the largest, a chainmail hauberk that shimmered under the dining hall's light. It was a practical gift, one that spoke volumes of the dangers they faced and the need for protection. Mariel's eyes widened at the sight of it, her fingers tracing over the cool metal links with a sense of awe.

The older raithe servant who had been assigned to Sloane and had taken a particular liking to Mariel offered a small woven bracelet and a hug that the girl happily accepted. The simple gift was met with a warm smile and a heartfelt thank you from Mariel, who immediately put it on.

Then it was Sloane's turn. She presented Mariel with the case that revealed the obsidian necklace, the gemstone catching the light and shimmering with the glow of the small runes.

"This is for you, Mariel," she said, her voice soft. "It's more than just a necklace. It's a tool, a conduit for your magic."

The girl carefully removed the necklace, her mouth open wide as she gently caressed the pendant.

Sloane would explain the details later. That the dark, glassy stone was a conduit for necromantic power, enhancing the user's connection with bones and other things that made up a dead body. For a necromancer, obsidian could amplify their ability to communicate with and control spirits or undead beings, making their commands more potent and their communication clearer. It facilitated a deeper connection, one that would likely allow Mariel to control stronger or *more* undead.

She wasn't sure what that actually looked like in practice, but she would work with Mariel to test it. In her mind, the girl was like her, creating an army of golem-like creatures or beings but ones made of bone and flesh rather than metal.

No judgments here. Necromancers get a bad rap in fantasy.

Mariel's eyes widened, her gaze flicking between Sloane and the necklace. "For my magic?" she echoed quietly, her voice wavering.

Sloane nodded, her gaze steady. “Yes. This necklace will amplify your magic, giving you more *control* over it. It will strengthen your connections with your... magical abilities, making it easier for you to communicate your intentions to your... magic.”

The girl nodded gravely. “I understand. This will allow me to do it safely?”

“Yes,” Sloane said as she stood up and walked around the table to stand behind the girl. “We’ll test it together in the future. I’ll be there to guide you every step of the way.”

Across the table, Stefan and Nemura shared a look, their expressions serious. Yemina’s eyes narrowed slightly, a hint of concern flickering in her gaze, and while she didn’t know the full extent of Mariel’s magic, she was aware that the cultists believed her to be an Avatar of Tenera. The implications of Sloane’s gift were surely not lost on her as the woman was likely considering how the two facts related to the other.

But as Sloane clasped the necklace around Mariel’s neck, a memory flashed through her mind. She saw herself, years ago, clasping a similar necklace around her daughter Gwyn’s neck. The memory was so vivid, so real, that she could almost feel Gwyn’s curly hair under her fingers. A single tear slipped down her cheek, but she quickly wiped it away, not wanting to dampen the mood.

Mariel looked at her, her eyes filled with understanding and gratitude. She mouthed a silent ‘thank you’, her smile bright and genuine as Sloane returned to her seat.

With the gift-giving concluded, the feast began. Servants brought out platters of food, filling the table with a variety of dishes. The aroma of the food filled the room, and everyone dug in, the atmosphere light and cheerful despite the underlying tension. As they ate, they chatted and laughed, the sound of their voices echoing through the hall. It was a moment of peace, a brief respite from the dangers that lurked outside the estate’s walls.



Sloane and Yemina followed behind Ilian, the man pointing out and describing several portraits and paintings that adorned the walls as they slowly walked through the manor’s halls.

The trio made their way into a cozy office, the room filled with the scent of aged books and polished wood. Lord Estos moved to a small bar set up against one wall, a decanter of amber liquid sitting alone with three glasses.

“Would either of you care for a drink?” he offered, holding up the decanter. Both Sloane and Yemina politely declined, to which the man simply shrugged and poured himself a glass.

Three plush chairs were arranged in a semi-circle around a low table, and he gestured for them to take a seat. As they settled into the comfortable chairs, Ilian took a sip of his drink and set it down on the table, his gaze thoughtful.

“Dinner was quite enjoyable,” he began, his tone warm. “It was a pleasure to see young Mariel so delighted with her gifts.”

Sloane nodded, a soft smile playing on her lips. “Yes, it was. She’s been through a lot, and it was nice to see her so happy. Thank you for allowing us to celebrate her birthday here.”

Lord Estos returned her smile, his eyes reflecting genuine pleasure. “It was my honor, Sloane. It’s not every day one gets to host such a special occasion.” His gaze shifted to Yemina as if to ask a question, but one look at the paladin’s unreadable expression had him reconsider and pick up his drink to take a small sip.

Sloane decided not to waste any further time, her gaze steady as she reminded him of the purpose of the meeting. “You mentioned earlier that you had some information for us?”

Ilian nodded, setting his glass down on the table. “Right to business. Very well.” He leaned back in his chair, his gaze thoughtful as he began to explain. “My people have managed to locate an agent of a smuggler. The man he represents is a known criminal, wanted by the Sovereigns, but he is not currently wanted by Rosale. He has the means and the connections to help smuggle us past the Vlatedian blockade.”

He paused, his gaze shifting between Sloane and Yemina. “However, his services come with a price. Further, we will be forced to travel to a location of his choosing for pickup, and it will not be here in the city.”

Sloane shared a look with Yemina, who gave her a subtle nod. “What’s the price?” Sloane asked, her voice steady.

Ilian’s lips twitched into a small smile. “He’s heard of items being imbued with magic. He wants his sword to be one such item, a weapon worthy of a proper sea captain. He assumed that a noble of my standing could procure one, little did he know that I have the woman who started the entire magical item venture with me.”

Sloane raised a brow. *A single magical sword? Is this serious? That’s... easy.* “I can do that,” she said, her tone betraying her thoughts on the matter.

Ilian’s smile widened. “Don’t worry, he also asked for gold, but I will provide that. The agent will meet with my people in a week to give information on where to go.” He raised his glass in a toast. “To successful ventures and safe journeys.”

Sloane rolled her eyes. “So, a week.”

Lord Estos nodded. "A week. We will start preparing our things."

"We as well. We'll need to sell our wagon and most of everything within it. How much can we bring?" she asked.

Ilian shrugged. "I am uncertain, I will ensure that question is asked at the next meeting. However, assume that you will not be able to bring much. After discussing the matter with the agent, we are each allowed to bring two guards. So, Toren will be bringing several chests, along with two guards. I also have several chests and my guards. I suggest you mention that your raithe guard is your husband and Mariel your adopted daughter, if it comes up. Just to forgo any issues."

"Understood," she replied. "And Ilian? Thank you."

He raised his glass, a genuine smile on his face. "Of course, Sloane. Let's get away from this shit war."

Sloane sighed. "To that, I couldn't agree more."



The sun was setting as Sloane and Stefan made their way back to the Estos Estate with several servants in tow, their footsteps echoing in the quiet evening air. They had spent the better part of the day in the city, selling off the wagon and a large portion of their accumulated supplies but it was a necessary step, one that would help lighten their load for the journey ahead.

Sloane glanced back at the servants, her gaze lingering on the large saddle bags and packs slung over their shoulders. She had commissioned a custom saddle for Vesper, complete with oversized saddle bags to carry what remained of her possessions. The golem would be their primary mode of transporting things until they reached Rosale, and it was essential to make the most of its carrying capacity.

"Almost there," Stefan murmured, his voice breaking through her thoughts. Sloane nodded, steeling herself for the challenges that lay ahead.

The servants moved with practiced efficiency, carrying the saddles and packs into the room that had been converted into Sloane's workshop. Inside, Mariel and Yemina huddled together over the tome the priestess-in-training had been given for her birthday, their heads bent in quiet conversation while Tiberius is perched on the workbench, his gaze focused on a point on the floor next to Mariel.

As Sloane and Stefan entered, the two looked up, their conversation halting. Mariel quickly stowed the books back into her satchel, a locked journal catching Sloane's eye as the girl hastily put

it away. It was the same journal that Praetor Shalas from Marketbol had mentioned to Sloane, with strict instructions not to pry into its contents.

“Hi, Sloane!” Mariel greeted, her face lighting up as she stood to meet them.

Sloane returned the smile. “Hey, Mariel. What are you two up to?”

“We’re continuing Mariel’s studies, and she is making good progress,” Yemina replied, her gaze shifting to the servants as they unloaded the saddles and packs. “How did things go in the city? Any troubles?”

Stefan shrugged nonchalantly, a small smile playing on his lips. “We managed to sell off most of the extraneous stuff that we won’t be able to bring with us, and we’re a bit richer for it. We’re now ready to go at a moment’s notice since Lord Estos’s people should be meeting with the agent anytime now.”

Sloane nodded, satisfied with the outcome. Every bit of gold would help in their journey ahead.

An idea suddenly sparked in Sloane’s mind. She followed the line of Tiberius’s gaze to a spot beside Mariel, her lips curving into a small smile when she detected a subtle distortion in that area. Eagerly, she engaged her [Mana Sight] only to find herself taken aback by an unexpected revelation—only the slightest trace of black mana was visible to her.

Vesper is improving her concealment ability quickly.

As the servants exited the room, the air shimmered and Vesper reappeared. The large golem was sprawled out protectively around the chair where Mariel had been sitting, her long tail stretched out lazily behind her. Her appendages were neatly tucked against her back, giving her a deceptively docile appearance.

Mariel reached out, her hand gently patting the golem’s head. Vesper responded with a low, purring sound, her head dipping in contentment.

Sloane watched the interaction with a smirk. “How do you manage to befriend my golems so easily, Mariel?” she asked, her tone teasing.

The girl shrugged, her hand still stroking Vesper’s metallic head. “I don’t know,” she replied, her voice filled with genuine affection. “They’re just so nice to me.”

Sloane chuckled, shaking her head in amusement. It seemed that Mariel had a knack for making friends, even with magical constructs, something Sloane couldn’t help but relate to.

Nemura entered the room, her expression serious as she whispered something to Stefan. The man nodded, turning to Mariel with a smile. “Mariel, would you like to go practice with your dagger?” he asked, his tone light.

The girl's eyes widened in excitement, and she quickly agreed, following Stefan out of the room. As the door closed behind them, Sloane turned her attention back to Yemina and Nemura, her eyes narrowing in suspicion.

Nemura took a deep breath, her gaze meeting Sloane's. "Three things," she began, her tone grave. "First, I think I've confirmed it. The estate is under observation, and the few patrols by the City Guard are so predictable it physically hurts me."

Yemina nodded in agreement. "That brings us to the second thing. We believed there is some sort of magic or magical item that is leading the cultists to Mariel. However, after taking her out through the city two days ago while you were working on enchanting her chainmail—"

Sloane interrupted, her voice sharp with surprise and concern. "You took her out of the estate? Without telling me?"

The two women shared a look before Yemina nodded. "Yes. We deemed the risk necessary, and both Nemura and I are capable of keeping her safe in a public area. None of the people we believe to be affiliated with the cultists were aware, and after spending the day out, we saw no one following us. Meanwhile, Stefan was searching for more observers and he believes more arrived throughout the day."

"So, we now believe that they are tracking *you* somehow," Nemura finished for her.

A chill coursed down Sloane's spine at the revelation.

Their attention had been so focused on the cultists' desire to take Mariel that the notion of herself being the inadvertent beacon that was leading them to the girl hadn't even crossed her mind. But now that the thought was in her head, she felt a knot of dread twist in her stomach and swallowed hard as bile rose in her throat.

She took a deep breath, steeling herself as she pushed the thoughts aside, forcing herself to stay calm.

"What's the third thing?" she asked, not sure she wanted to hear something worse.

Nemura sighed, her gaze flicking to Yemina before returning to Sloane. "Despite the attraction that Lord Estos is showing for you, we believe—"

"Wait, you didn't tell me that," Yemina snapped, her eyes widening in surprise as she turned to Nemura.

Nemura shrugged, a hint of a smirk playing on her lips. "I thought it was obvious. I know you've seen the way he looks at her, especially without that breastplate..."

Sloane felt her cheeks heat up at the comment, and glanced down at her chest, suddenly very happy they decided to remain armored except for when they were bathing.

“What’s the third thing, Nemura?” she asked, eager to steer the conversation back on track.

Nemura’s smirk faded, her expression turning serious once more. “We believe that Lord Estos might be involved with the cultists.”

The words hung heavy in the air, and Sloane felt her heart drop. She had trusted Ilian and had believed him to be a respectable individual, if a bit ambitious. She looked between Yemina and Nemura, her mind racing as she tried to process the information.

“We don’t have any concrete evidence,” Yemina quickly added, her gaze sympathetic. “But there are some things that don’t add up. His eagerness to partner with your business, the ease with which we’ve been able to stay here...”

“He got most of his information from the Banking Guild’s representative, Toren,” Sloane reminded them, trying to explain away the man’s actions. “And his House guard is larger than just a couple extra Blades helping us.”

Nemura nodded. “This is true, and I hope you’re right.”

Sloane was looking down when both Vesper and Tiberius’s heads jerked toward the window in mechanical synchrony, the displacer beast’s appendages raising as the golem stood.

A moment later, yelling could be heard from outside, followed by a large crack and crumbling of stone.

Nemura and Yemina were already pulling their blades when Sloane turned back to them, a scowl on her face at the timing of it all. A moment later, Stefan burst into the room guiding Mariel with a hand protectively on her shoulder. His expression was serious as he nodded to Nemura and stepped away from the fourteen-year-old.

“Sloane, if it’s the cultists, you and your golems need to protect Mariel,” her head guard said. “We’ll deal with this.”

The artificer turned and gestured for Vesper to join her as the others left the room. The golem moved quickly to stand next to Mariel, a low growl sounding as the crystals set into her appendages glowed with power.

Another crash could be heard from outside, followed by more urgent shouting, and just like that, their brief respite was broken.

Sloane pulled Mariel close with her watch arm while freeing her caster from its holster with the other, her grip tightening around the hilt as she prepared herself.