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## A Desire to Learn

Sloane stared at the elf woman in front of her. She was shorter than her, closer to Maud's height, and seemed extremely weary. The brunette with pink eyes looked at her with a hint of desperation. She wasn't sure what the woman had been through, but Sloane figured it wouldn't hurt to listen to her.

"Alright. Let's talk in my suite. It's more private there."

Not only would the suite be more private, but it was significantly more comfortable. The Ivory Rose Inn didn't do half measures, in fact, the inn itself was more like a luxury bed and breakfast she was used to back home than an inn, which made sense due to its location in Noble Way. It was by far the more comfortable place they'd stayed in yet. That even counted Lord Estos's manor in Swanbrook.

Stefan, catching Sloane's eye, leaned in subtly. "I'll start on the... task you had for me," he murmured, his tone low.

"Just be careful and keep me updated," Sloane responded, her voice equally hushed.

His response was a mischievous grin and a playful wink. She watched him leave, shaking her head slightly. *That man will be the death of me.*

As they made their way to the suite, Mariel walked alongside Sloane, her youthful curiosity evident. However, sensing the gravity of the upcoming conversation, Sloane gently suggested, "Mariel, maybe you can use this time to catch up on your studies or dive into one of those books you've been excited about?"

Mariel, catching the hint, nodded with a quick smile. "Of course, I'll head to my room. Can I take Tib with me?"

Sloane smiled. "Of course."

The bird in question chirped, gently took off from Nemura's shoulder, and landed on Mariel's outstretched arm.

The suite door opened to reveal a spacious, lavishly decorated room. Nemura scanned the surroundings, her posture tense before nodding contently to herself. After a moment, her eyes settled on Vesper, and let out a resigned sigh. "I should have done this before coming up, but I'll go request some tea from downstairs. Seems like we'll need it."

Sloane chuckled, appreciating the telv's attempt to ease the atmosphere. "Thank you, Nemura. That would be lovely. Maybe we should look for a proper attendant in the future."

Nemura's pleading look was adorable on the two-hundred-three centimeter woman. Mariel gave her a smile and a wave that Sloane returned before hurrying off with the falcon golem to her room.

Sloane turned to their guest.

Aila hesitated for a moment, her gaze flitting between Sloane and Nemura as if gauging their receptiveness. The grandeur of the suite seemed to momentarily distract her, her eyes widening in appreciation. The plush furnishings, the intricate designs on the walls, and the grand fireplace at the center spoke of opulence.

"Miss..."

"Aila. Aila Iliric," the woman in front of Sloane replied.

Sloane, sensing her awe, motioned for her to sit. "Please, Aila, make yourself comfortable. I'd like to hear more about your research."

Aila nodded, taking a seat opposite Sloane. She watched, fascinated, as Vesper lazily settled on a rug and let out the fakest yawn Sloane had ever heard.

Clearing her throat, Aila began, "Alright. So... I apologize if this takes some time..."

Sloane waved off her concerns. "Don't worry. We have plenty of time, just start at the beginning."

The elf nodded quickly before taking a deep breath. "My research began with my colleague, Aredd. We discovered something revolutionary, and as the Church discovered more and more things regarding mana and the projects in the capital became more important, our research was increasingly deemed nonvital. We managed to scrape by and continue until his untimely death in a monster attack... it not only took a dear friend but also the financial backing we relied upon. I've been trying to continue our work, but without a team or funds, it's been challenging."

Sloane frowned. "I'm sorry about your friend."

She also suspected she shouldn't reveal that she discovered many of the things that the Church knew. Granted, the Ceremony of Paths came from someone else, and many other discoveries came from the East, but everything regarding domains, hell the term 'mana', and such came from her.

The woman sniffed and quickly wiped at her eyes. "T-Thank you. Now... uh... I'm sorry, I had a whole speech planned out in my head..."

"What exactly were you researching?"

Aila took a deep breath, her fingers playing with the edge of her sleeve. "Oh, yes. We discovered *essentia*. It's the substance that acts as a bridge, allowing mana to interact with an individual, enhancing and allowing their abilities. Our studies revealed the depth to which mana has seeped into our world."

She paused, her gaze distant. “We discovered that children aged ten and above were infused with enough essentia during the Flash to reach the sixteenth step—as the Church calls it. Younger children, however, only received essentia equivalent to their age. This essentia quantity determines the steps, which in turn dictate the strength of one’s attributes.”

Both of Sloane’s brows raised.

*They discovered experience?*

*Holy shit.*

Sloane’s brow furrowed as she determined how to pose a question in a way that Aila would understand.

With a shrug, she went with what seemed easiest. “So, you’re saying that by gaining more essentia, we will gain more steps and thus increase our attributes.”

Aila nodded. “Precisely. And it’s not just about quantity. The core quality of an individual determines the purity of the essentia that floods their system. The purer the essentia, the more pronounced the enhancement of attributes.”

*Higher rarity equals more attributes per step. Got it.*

“So, how *do* steps factor into this?”

Aila’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “That’s where our research was groundbreaking. So, your core fills with unbound essentia until you feel that *rush*. As I’m sure you are already aware, that rush is you gaining a step. All that means is the unbound essentia has now been bound to your body, thus increasing your attributes. We believe that mana has specific breakpoints, which I’ve tentatively termed ‘refinements’. I suspect that step sixteen is the first of these. But I’m sure that there are more refinements, each amplifying the effects of the attributes.”

Sloane leaned back, processing the information. “And you believe that by understanding this essentia and these refinements, we can harness the full potential of mana?”

Aila nodded vigorously. “Yes! But without the necessary resources, I’m at a standstill.”

Sloane considered her words, her mind racing. The implications of Aila’s research were vast. If she was understanding the researcher correctly, essentia was basically experience like in a roleplaying game, or more aptly, a mana-infused substance integral to the body’s arcanonexus system.

*Oooh, I like that. I should remember that term*

It also meant if she could figure out more about this ‘essentia’ then she could likely quantify the actual changes that were happening with each step.

But first, she needed to figure out exactly what Aila wanted.

“I’m intrigued,” Sloane finally said. “I can’t promise anything right now, but I’m willing to hear more. What exactly are you hoping for by coming to me?”

Aila hesitated, then ventured, “Given your evident proficiency with mana and cores—evident from your... metal creatures...”

“Golems,” Sloane interjected gently.

Aila nodded. “Right, golems. Our research also touched upon beast cores. If you’ve harnessed them to craft such lifelike golems, then partnering with you seems ideal.”

At that moment, Nemura re-entered the suite, balancing a tray laden with teapots and cups. She placed it on the table between them. “Tea?” she offered, pouring a steaming cup for Sloane.

“Thank you,” Sloane murmured, accepting the cup. After Nemura poured tea for Aila and herself, she mentioned she’d join Mariel as she made a last cup for the teenager, receiving an appreciative nod from Sloane.

As the aroma of tea wafted between them, Aila broached the core of her proposal: she sought Sloane’s financial backing for her research, offering her expertise with everything she’d learned so far in return.

Sloane sipped her tea, then shared, “I’ve established a research center in Marketbol, focusing on the interaction between mana, alchemy, runes, and various materials. I’m contemplating a similar venture here in Nornport, in collaboration with House Estos.”

Aila’s eyes widened in surprise. “That’s... almost too perfect,” she whispered, seemingly to herself.

Sloane chuckled softly. “Life has a way of surprising us. But let’s not rush into anything. What do you say? We meet tomorrow and you can show me some more of what you’ve learned, and I’ll show you some things I have.”

Aila smiled. “You show me yours, I’ll show you mine? I like it. Would you be amenable to meeting me at my workshop?”

Sloane coughed into her hand. “Yes, sure. I’d be happy to meet with you.”

The elf was beaming as she finished her tea and wrote down an address of where Sloane would meet her.



A soft knock roused Sloane from a deep slumber, pulling her away from a dream of her daughter. Blinking away the remnants of sleep, she heard a familiar voice. "Sloane?"

She tried to respond, but her voice came out as a groggy mumble. "Mmmggh?"

Mariel peeked in, her steps tentative as she entered the room. The corners of her mouth lifted in a gentle smile. "Stefan and Nemura ordered food to be delivered to the room. They said to come wake you up."

Sloane stretched, yawning. "Why did they send you?"

Mariel chuckled softly. "Stefan and Nemura argued about it. Then they glanced my way, and Nemura suggested they send 'the cute one'. So, here I am."

Sloane smirked, her eyes crinkling with amusement. "Their cunning knows no bounds. Alright, I'm awake."

Mariel hesitated, her gaze dropping to the floor. Sloane's brow furrowed. "What's on your mind?"

The rai the girl took a deep breath. "I overheard your conversation with Nemura last night."

Sloane's eyes narrowed slightly. "Which part?"

"You mentioned wanting an attendant. I thought... maybe I could fill that role? At least until we reach the capital and I must... leave." Her voice wavered, and she sniffled.

Sloane softened, patting the space beside her. "Come, sit."

Mariel complied, her movements hesitant. Once seated, Sloane studied her. "What's truly bothering you?"

The rai the girl's eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "I feel... I feel like I'm not contributing to the group enough. I feel... worthless."

Sloane's heart ached at the young girl's words. Mariel's pale-grey face turned to her and those ice-blue eyes looked so... vulnerable. Her quivering lower lip revealed the faintest hint of fangs.

Drawing Mariel into a gentle embrace, Sloane whispered, "You are far from worthless. Remember, we're here to help you. It's okay to lean on us."

Mariel's voice trembled. "But we're staying in this city for a while. I want to be of use."

Sloane pulled back slightly, holding Mariel's gaze. "Yes, we're pausing our traveling briefly, but we won't stay long. We have a destination, and we need to get you there."

Mariel's voice was barely audible, laden with emotion. "What if I don't want to leave?"

Her heart tightened. She had feared this. They'd spent so much time together, and Sloane knew that the Church was all the girl had before meeting them. Now, after a year of just the four of them...

Sloane couldn't say she didn't care. She sometimes stayed up late at night wracked with guilt over how much the girl had grown on her. It made her feel like a shit mother since Gwyn was still out there and this young girl was here, depending on her. Clearly looking up to her and looking for something Sloane wasn't sure she could give.

But she refused to push Mariel away. It just... it had to be her decision and Sloane didn't want to influence it. Plus, Sloane was sure all the goodwill she'd gained with the Church would be thrown away if they thought she was kidnapping the priestess-in-training.

*Yeah, this could be an issue.*

Sloane took a deep breath, her fingers gently lifting Mariel's chin so their eyes met. "Mariel, we have a responsibility to at least get you to the capital. What happens after that, whether you stay or come back with us, is entirely up to you. I would never force you into a decision."

Mariel's eyes searched Sloane's, looking for any hint of insincerity. Finding none, she nodded slowly. "I understand. It's just... I've... I mean... I really like all of you. I feel part of something. I'm just an orphan and... I never felt that at the Church. The thought of leaving is daunting."

*Poor kid.*

Sloane smiled softly. "And we've grown fond of you. But remember, life is a series of choices. Whatever you decide, we'll support you."

Mariel took a shaky breath, trying to compose herself. "Okay. I'll think about it."

Sloane squeezed her hand reassuringly. "Take your time. And if you truly want to help, to be more involved, I'd appreciate an assistant. Especially with some of the... complexities of this world."

Mariel looked puzzled. "Like what?"

Sloane laughed, gesturing to her outfit. "For starters, the clothing here! It's like a puzzle every morning. I swear, I've never struggled so much with buttons and laces in my life."

Mariel chuckled, her earlier tension dissipating. "They really are a challenge, aren't they? I remember the first time I tried to put on a dress by myself. It was a disaster."

Sloane grinned, picturing the scene. "Oh, I can imagine. I've had my own battles with those contraptions. But if you're up for the task, I could use some help navigating the intricacies of noble attire and someone who can take notes and help me stay on task. You know how I get."

Mariel's eyes sparkled with mischief. "We most certainly do... So, you need my help to get dressed? Typical noble, unable to do anything without help."

Sloane feigned indignation. "Well, when you put it that way... Actually, yes, I suppose I do."

Mariel's laughter filled the room, a sound that warmed Sloane's heart. "Alright, I accept. But only if you promise to help me when I get tangled in my own dresses."

"It's a deal," Sloane said, pulling Mariel into a hug.

As they pulled apart, Sloane's expression turned serious. "Mariel, always remember that you're valued, not for what you can do for us, but for who you are. As an honorary member of House Reinhart, you're a part of this family, and we care about you."

Mariel's eyes welled up again, but this time with tears of gratitude. "Thank you, Sloane. That means more to me than you'll ever know. And... if I do get to stay... I'm really excited to meet Gwyn."

Sloane's breath hitched but she quickly recovered and forced a smile on her face as she shoved down the emotions that bubbled in her chest. She brushed away a tear from Mariel's cheek. "I'm sure you two will be great friends even if she and I have to return just to visit you. Now, let's get ready. We have a busy day ahead, and I could use my new assistant's expertise."

Mariel grinned, her earlier worries momentarily forgotten. "Lead the way, my lady."

After Sloane finally got up, Mariel, with a determined glint in her eyes, took on the challenge of helping Sloane into a seemingly simple dress. But, as Sloane had lamented earlier, it was deceptively complicated with its myriad of laces crisscrossing the bodice.

*Why does fashion have to be so complicated?* Sloane mused internally as she felt Mariel's fingers deftly working the laces, pulling them taut and securing them in place.

Once dressed, Sloane turned her attention to Mariel's hair. The black strands felt cool and smooth under her fingers as she brushed them out, gathering them up and skillfully twisting them into a neat bun. The young girl watched Sloane in the reflection of the vanity, her ice-blue eyes filled with a mix of admiration and curiosity.

Sloane caught her gaze and smiled. "You're growing up so fast. You've definitely grown a few centimeters since we met," she murmured, finishing the bun and securing it with a pin. She then began arranging her own hair, pulling it back into a loose braid.

Mariel smiled. "You're still so tall... Well, not Nemura tall, but she's one of those Vlareidian giantesses."

That made the baroness chuckle. "She's definitely something."

As they stepped out into the seating area, the aroma of breakfast wafted towards them. The inn's workers were bustling about, setting up an array of dishes. But their movements were hesitant, almost jittery. Sloane followed their nervous glances to find the source of their unease.

Nemura stood nearby, her posture rigid and her expression stern. Every so often, she'd shoot a worker a sharp look, causing them to flinch. The slight tremor in their hands was evident, especially when they were in her direct line of sight.

*Helicoptering might be an understatement*, Sloane thought, suppressing a smirk.

Stefan, in stark contrast, appeared utterly relaxed. He was sprawled on a couch, a cup of tea in hand, seemingly oblivious to Nemura's intense supervision. Or perhaps he was just used to it.

Tiberius perched beside the Blade on the back of the couch while Vesper was sprawled out on the floor in front of him, both of her appendages pulled in tightly against her body.

Sloane couldn't help but let out a soft chuckle, drawing Stefan's attention. He raised an eyebrow in silent inquiry.

"Good morning," she greeted, nodding towards Nemura. "Someone is taking breakfast very seriously today."

Stefan's lips twitched into a smile. "It appears so. But then again, when doesn't she?"

Mariel giggled, joining in on the shared amusement. "I think she just wants everything to be perfect for us."

Sloane nodded, her gaze softening as she looked at Nemura. "She always does. It's just her way. Such a sweetheart."

"I just think she's hungry. She didn't eat much last night," Stefan replied.

An exaggerated sigh comes from the mountain. "I can hear everything you're saying, you know."

Sloane met her gaze, a playful glint in her eyes. "Oh, I know."

As the last of the workers scurried out, Stefan rose gracefully from his lounging position, stretching his limbs. The four of them settled around the table, which was laden with a sumptuous spread. Cheeses of varying textures and flavors, slices of fresh fruit glistening with dew, warm bread that released a comforting aroma, perfectly cooked eggs, and a pot of steaming porridge beckoned them.

Sloane took a moment to appreciate the spread before her, then cleared her throat as she started to fill her plate with something that reminded her of kiwis. "While we're in Nornport, we need a strategy."

She picked up a piece of cheese, her fingers playing with it absently. "With Vesper by my side, Nemura, I'd like you to assist with any local monster disturbances. But," she added quickly, seeing the protest forming on Nemura's lips, "you need to be cautious. I'll keep Mariel with me. Take Tiberius, he can scout for you. I'll... figure out a way to help him communicate with you."



Nemura's eyes narrowed, but before she could voice her complaint, Sloane continued, "We can't afford to stagnate. We need to keep progressing, getting stronger. The more steps we gain, the more we can handle with just our small group."

The telv woman sighed, her shoulders slumping in reluctant agreement.

Sloane's expression softened, and a mischievous smile played on her lips. "Also, I know we've talked about this, but I really need you to embrace the role of a knight. I'm fairly certain I have the authority to knight you, but I respect your wishes. Can you at least play the part while we're here?"

Nemura groaned audibly, rubbing her temples. "Do you even know why I'm so resistant to the title?"

Sloane tilted her head, genuinely curious. "No, enlighten me."

Nemura took a deep breath. "In Vlaredia, knighthood isn't handed out like party favors. We have one knight order, and they're held in the highest esteem. They're the royal guard, the very defenders of our throne. Only those who serve the emperor and empress directly can claim the title. Other nations... they seem to bestow knighthood without understanding its weight. I'm not saying they're undeserving, but in my culture, it's sacred."

Mariel, her eyes wide and earnest, chimed in, "But Nemura, you're already doing everything a knight does. You're our protector, our shield. You're kind of a big deal."

Nemura's stern facade cracked, her eyes softening as she looked at the young girl. "Maybe someday, kid. But not today. I can pretend, for the sake of our mission. The Empire's Fist knows the value of deception. But to truly bear the title and the significance it entails? I'm not there yet. I'm not... worthy."

Sloane gave a nod of understanding. "I might not agree with your self-assessment, but I respect your stance." Her gaze then shifted to Stefan, her tone taking on a hint of playful authority. "You."

Stefan, ever the dramatic, arched a snowy eyebrow and pointed at himself with exaggerated surprise. "Me?"

"Yes, you. You are now my designated chief of staff and spymaster, have you gathered any intel on the tasks I gave you?"

Stefan leaned back, his fingers steepled. "Indeed. House Estos is among the three dominant families in Nornport and owns the smaller of the two ports in the city. Their current predicament? Succession. Ilian Estos is but one of four potential heirs. As it stands, he's the underdog since his cousins have more precedence. Here in Rosale, the nobility is a tad different than in other places—likely due to its size. Succession is based on merit and thus why Ilian is even considered. Further, land doesn't hold as much weight in their titles as in places like Avira. With that said, House Estos is on par with a

viscounty and Ilian's uncle is the current patriarch, as you know. There's another House under a Viscount Sae'ta of similar stature that controls the city's main port. But apparently, as a powersharing scheme, the two viscount families allied generations ago to further the prominence of their Houses in order to counter the more powerful House Tath. Both viscounts have business on sea and land trade—as expected from a port city, but House Sae'ta is primarily concerned with the sea, while House Estos focuses on land trade. House Estos balances the difference by owning the most profitable mines in the nearby hills. Nornport's countess and city lady is from House Tath. They have interests all over the nation as one of three counts or countesses and have a direct line to the crown. After the king, they are *the* most influential people in the nation.”

Sloane's fingers tapped rhythmically on the table. “Interesting. Ilian's moves are starting to make sense. Aligning with my Center could be his game-changer if he's as ambitious as I believe he is. But Rosale might prove challenging for us and it seems that we may have significant competition. This meeting with Aila could be a boon or a bust. I have a few ideas of how we can use what she's learned. If so, it will help break the stranglehold of the Church, at least for the more affluent. The Church will push back if we try and cut them out completely.”

Nemura, her expression contemplative, chimed in. “Don't forget. Estos's intentions aren't solely about the Center and the influence it will bring.”

Sloane raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

With an exasperated roll of her golden eyes, Nemura reminded, “We discussed this before our departure from Swanbrook, remember?”

Sloane's face lit up with realization. “Ah. *That*. I remember you also thought he was part of the cultists.”

Nemura winced. “Well, we learned that he wasn't. Luckily. But, the man is... it's a bit much.”

Stefan's chuckle filled the room, drawing Mariel's attention. The young girl's face was a mask of confusion. “What's the joke?”

Nemura, taking a moment to savor a strawberry, finally shared, “Ilian Estos seems to have developed a... fondness for Sloane.”

Mariel's eyes darted between the two women, her face a canvas of shock. “He wishes to court you? What did you tell him?”

Sloane shot Nemura a mock glare. “He hasn't made any actual overtures. And for the record, romance isn't on my agenda. At all. You all know that I have no plans to stay in Nornport or Rosale. Besides, he's like ten years younger than me.”

Mariel's eyes narrowed in thought. "Wait, how old are you exactly? I don't actually remember you saying during your birthday."

"I'm thirty-six."

Mariel's eyes widened in genuine surprise. "Really? I never would've—"

Sloane's gaze sharpened, cutting her off. "Choose your next words wisely, young priestess."

Mariel coughed, a hint of red tinting her cheeks. "Apologies. I'd rather not have an early meeting with Relena."

The hyena at the table, Stefan, laughed and laughed.

Sloane just grabbed a hunk of bread and bit into it fiercely.



After their morning meal, Nemura and Stefan set out, each with their respective tasks. Tiberius perched proudly on Nemura's shoulder, while a series of runic grenades dangled ominously from her belt.

Emerging from Sloane's room, Mariel carefully held out the baroness's satchel. "I've packed your notebook, some enchanting ink, and your engraving pen. I made sure it was safe in its case. Your Caster's in there too. I remembered not to touch the trigger, just like you taught me." She patted a side pouch. "And the cartridges are here. Are you sure about leaving your sword behind?"

Sloane, adjusting her attire, nodded. "Absolutely. Today, I play the part of a foreign noble. Besides, I have magic on my side. Plus a protective kitty," She winked at Vesper.

The golem, with her six luminescent onyx eyes, gazed back at Sloane.

"Yes, you, you oversized feline."

Vesper responded with a deep, mechanical meow that sounded suspiciously like a protest.

Sloane chuckled, slinging the satchel over her shoulder. "Ready to stand out?"

As they prepared to leave, Vesper began to shimmer, starting her invisibility. Sloane, however, had other plans. "Stay visible today, Vesper. We're aiming for shock and awe."

Vesper, adjusting to the command, walked proudly beside Mariel as the trio descended the stairs.

Sloane could feel the weight of curious eyes on them but chose to ignore it. She leaned down to Mariel, her voice a confident whisper. “Chin up. Today, you’re not just an assistant; you’re a reflection of my status.”

Mariel, inspired by Sloane’s words, straightened her posture. “I’ve got this,” she murmured with newfound determination.

A hint of a smile played on Sloane’s lips.

“Only one individual in this city holds a rank above ours. I won’t let anyone else give us grief. But, to be honest, I’m not even worried about that person because I have something they don’t.”

“What’s that?”

“Phenomenal cosmic powers, of course,” she said with a wink.

Exiting the inn, Sloane took a moment to survey the bustling streets of Nornport. A groan escaped her lips as the realization hit.

“What’s the matter?”

Sloane grimaced. “I’ve got the address, but I haven’t the faintest idea where it is.”

Mariel suppressed a chuckle, pointing ahead. “There’s a city guard. Maybe he can help.”

Nodding in agreement, Sloane led the way, with Mariel and the imposing figure of Vesper trailing behind. As they neared, the sun elf guard eyed them with a mix of curiosity and caution.

“Good morning!” Sloane greeted, injecting her voice with as much cheer as she could muster. “We’re new to the city and could use some directions.”

The guard’s gaze traveled from Vesper to Mariel and finally settled on Sloane. He seemed momentarily taken aback but quickly regained his composure. “Where are you headed, milady?”

Sloane handed him the slip of paper with Aila’s address. He squinted at it, then scanned the surrounding area, a frown creasing his brow. “This address... It’s in Fog End. Are you certain you wish to go there? It’s not a typical destination for someone of your stature.”

Sloane met his gaze evenly. “I have an appointment with a potential associate there. But I appreciate your concern.”

He hesitated, handing the paper back. “If I may, milady, I’d suggest a detour to the Mercenary Guild in Tradehaven. It might be wise to hire some additional protection.”

Sloane’s lips curled into a reassuring smile. “Your concern is touching, but my golem,” she gestured to Vesper, “is more than capable of ensuring my safety.”

The guard’s eyes widened a fraction as he truly took in Vesper’s formidable form. After a moment, he nodded. “Very well. I’ll tell you how to get there. But please...”

“I promise to consider your advice about the Mercenary Guild during my stay,” Sloane interjected gently.

A visible sigh escaped the guard. “Thank you, milady. That puts my mind at ease.”

She didn’t really feel the need to explain that she *did* have two guards, but they were off frolicking about their own tasks.

The image of Nemura *frolicking* through a meadow made its way into Sloane’s mind and she struggled to hold in a giggle.

It came out more like a pained cough. With that, he provided them with clear directions to their destination. After expressing their gratitude, Sloane, Mariel, and Vesper continued on their way, the streets of Nornport unfolding before them.

Sloane took the time to take in the sights, but instead of like the previous day where she looked at the buildings and business, she observed the people, taking in the diversity of the city’s populace.

Sun elves, with their rich, dark skin, made up the vast majority and seemed to have a monopoly on the Noble Way. Telv, both tanned and pale, mingled amongst them in increasing numbers the further from the noble quarter they were, but the people were clearly among the more working class demographic than the sun elves.

Stepping into Fog End was a stark contrast to what they’d left behind, with its more... functional architecture and a palpable sense of desperation in the air. It was unlike anything she’d ever seen back on Earth. She’d grown up with working class parents, but nothing in Michigan was nearly as bad as this—even Detroit—contrary to what many would suggest.

To Sloane’s surprise, there was a significant number of orkun around, or at least more than she had anticipated. Their greenish-brown skin and tusks gave them a distinct appearance, and they seemed to have carved out a niche for themselves in this part of the city.

But it was one particular orkun woman that made Sloane’s heart skip a beat. For a fleeting moment, the woman’s profile bore a striking resemblance to Ressa, a face Sloane had tried hard to forget. The pang of recognition, followed by the realization of her mistake, made Sloane’s breath catch in her throat. She shook her head, trying to dispel the ghost of the past, and pressed on.

*I wonder what happened to her.*

A family of dwarves caught her eye, their stout forms moving in unison, beards of varying lengths swaying as they walked while the women had long and intricate braids.

As the three of them moved deeper into the quarter, it became abundantly clear that their presence was drawing attention. Their attire, which was more refined compared to the worn and simple clothes of the Fog End residents, marked them as outsiders.

Children, with wide-eyed curiosity, pointed at Vesper, their fingers tracing the air as they tried to mimic the golem's movements. Adults whispered amongst themselves, their gazes lingering a tad too long, especially on Sloane's satchel and the intricate designs on Vesper.

But it was Mariel who garnered more attention than Sloane felt comfortable with. The girl's raithe heritage made her stand out, and Sloane realized with a start that, since their arrival in Rosale, she hadn't seen a single raithe other than Stefan and Mariel.

It was an odd realization, considering the number of raithe she had encountered before reaching this region. Sloane subtly shifted her stance, ensuring she was constantly positioned close to Mariel, even as she continued to ignore the stares and murmurs.

The further they delved into Fog End, the more the district's worn-down nature became evident. Buildings, though standing, showed signs of age and neglect. The streets, though busy with people about their days, carried an air of weariness. Yet, amidst the dilapidation, life thrived, painting a picture of resilience and determination.

*Medieval poverty at its finest.*

She sighed internally. *Focus, Sloane. Your Centers can one day help these people. Keep on task, Gwyn first, then the world's ailments.*

When they reached Aila's shop she realized the structure was no exception. The small, dilapidated structure made Sloane question the wisdom of her decision to come here. As she approached the entrance, a sense of unease settled over her.

Drawing mana into herself as a precaution, she knocked.

The instant rapid thud of footsteps echoed from within, culminating in the door being flung open to reveal a panting Aila. "Y-You came!" she exclaimed, her relief evident. "I... I wasn't sure you would."

Sloane's internal alarms blared. *Ah, fuck. She's desperate.*

"You promised insights into the true nature of mana," Sloane reminded her.

Aila's overly enthusiastic grin did little to assuage Sloane's concerns.

"Oh, I have so much to show you! Please, come in. Just... overlook the uh... clutter. Yeah, it's been a while since I had company. Or co-workers. Or anything."

Aila groaned quietly.

With a resigned sigh, Sloane stepped inside, uncertain of what awaited her.