

## Open House

“Thank you for seeing us on such short notice, Ser...”

“Ser Luven, milady. It is quite fortuitous that your retainer contacted our House when she did. I was just on my way here to inspect the property.” *Ha! Too bad he’s missing the ‘Mc’.*

Sloane smiled. “Fortuitous, indeed. What can you tell me about it?” she asked before glancing at the three women that accompanied her. Elodie and Adaega had joined since she valued their opinion on what was essentially a place that would be for *them*. Nemura followed behind and kept looking around as if she expected trouble. The telv knight was a middle-aged man that filled some low-level administration position within the city. He was well dressed, and Elodie had mentioned how polite and helpful the man had been when she was inquiring about the location. Sloane followed the man through a gate to a large courtyard with a beautiful fountain centered in the area. A cobblestone driveway that led back to the main street of the central district wrapped around, and was lined with flowers and hedges.

The structure standing in front of them was... something. From what Elodie had told her, it seemed to be a former estate of some type that had been converted into a government building, and now put up for sale again. *Sounds like something may be wrong with it.*

The building itself was nice to look at. It adhered to the city’s aesthetic with its white stone exterior and red shingled roof followed by gold painted trim. *Huh, if it were made of wood instead of stone, it would definitely give some Scandinavian vibes.* With its tiered overhanging roofs and centered arched entrances. It *did* have a weird golden spire that many buildings had within the city and wondered what it denoted.

“What do the spires mean on the buildings in the city?” she asked, curiosity winning over.

The knight glanced up as they approached. “One lord of the city had a brilliant idea of placing these on top of the roofs of every government location. Now they’re just decorative.”

Sloane hummed. *That’s an interesting fact.*

They walked into the building and Sloane was taken back by the wide open entryway that expanded into a lobby. There was a stairwell off to the right side along with doors to the left and one at the base of the stairs to the right. There was a set of double doors in the rear of the lobby.

“Interesting. I thought this was built as an estate?” she asked.

Elodie answered, “Yes, the city had some work done here to make it work better for its function. Walls were removed there to expand this area, and doors were added.”

“What was the purpose of this building before it was put up for sale?” Adaega asked.

Elodie looked over. “It was the Banking Guild’s headquarters. I remember coming here when I was younger.”

The woman from an alternate Earth simply nodded.

The knight smiled. “The current location of the Banking Guild took a decade to construct. It was a very task-intensive process. I dare say it is a memorable landmark of our city now.”

“Interesting,” Sloane said.

Ser Luven led them around the building and explained all of its amenities for the next hour. Adaega, however, didn't think that it would work due to a lack of ability to add smithing capabilities, as the city did not want such noise and smells in the central district. Sloane agreed and in the end, they had to pass on the location. She had to admit that while it wouldn't work well for the Center, its former role as a Guild headquarters had her thinking about something else.

The next two hours were filled by viewing the location in the Scholar's Quarter. That location was found in an area with other buildings dedicated to the economics school of the city. It was more of a campus-style property with ten structures of varying sizes, which was a former part of the school with fields of study no longer available. Frankly, Sloane thought it was perfect. They could even convert one of the buildings into a foundry. The only issue was the price and the fact that the quarter did not want a large commercial presence in the quarter. The school seemed almost reluctant to let go of the property, but Adaega had discussed the possibility of some shared uses. Sloane also discussed the overall goal of the Center and that seemed to assuage some of the hesitancy on part of the gentleman that showed them around. As they left, she sighed. They would need to purchase another location for the Runecard business if they chose here. The school simply would not want that part of the House business run there... but that didn't mean they couldn't fabricate the cards there...

When they arrived at the final location in the merchant's quarter, Sloane could see its appeal. The structure was a large building nestled into a long row of merchant headquarters and Guilds. It was another old Guild location and she finally gave in to her curiosity and pulled Elodie off to the side.

She quickly looked over to Adaega and the high-elven woman that was showing them the location. "Adaega? Could you start looking around, please? I need to talk to Elodie for a moment."

The woman nodded and gestured to the high elf woman showing them the property. "Please, I have some questions if you do not mind..."

Elodie tilted her head as she looked up at Sloane. "My Lady?"

"Elodie, I have a question for you. If you don't know, it's alright. How are guilds... *formed?*"

The woman raised a brow and tilted her head in thought. "As far as I know, any profession can create a guild. There would need to be enough members of that profession to require it, however. I believe the founder would need ratification and admittance into the Guilds as a whole. That just seems logical."

"How many is enough?"

Elodie shrugged. "I am unsure. There hasn't been a new guild since I have been alive."

Sloane was nodding along as she thought. "Alright. Something for later then. I think we may have something, Elodie."

The woman seemed confused for a moment but then her eyes opened wide.

"You mean to start an Artificer's Guild?"

Sloane shrugged. "If we can find other Artificers? Why not? I am sure we can get Reanny involved. This is more long-term, though." She glanced at the entrance to the building. "Let's go see what Adaega thinks of this place, yeah?"

Elodie nodded quickly, but Sloane could tell the cogs were turning in the woman's head.

Nemura placed a hand on her shoulder as they walked toward the building, and Sloane let the woman bend down and whisper into her ear. "It is a good plan, My Lady. We shouldn't do it here in Marketbol. Wait until we reach somewhere more neutral with fewer competing interests."

Sloane gave the woman a subtle nod to show she was listening. "Understood. We'll talk more later."

When they reached Adaega, the woman did not seem happy.

"What is wrong, Ms. Merbaker?" Sloane asked.

"This location will not work. The documents stated there would be space for a foundry. It's in the basement, there's poor ventilation and no way to cool it. Koren would be miserable. Alchemy facilities are abysmal as well. We would need a separate location for both. It's large like we want, but it is more office space than research space."

Sloane glanced at Elodie. "Is this too large for the other business?"

Elodie looked around before nodding. "Yes. It will be some time before we need something larger. The product will be made elsewhere and then moved to us for final touches and etching."

Sloane took a deep breath and then focused on the high elf woman that seemed a bit uncomfortable. "Thank you for your time. Unfortunately, this location simply will not suit our business."

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The group made it back to the inn fairly quickly, and Sloane was ready for a nap. She was tired but knew she shouldn't go to sleep for fear of sleeping the night away. She yawned, and Adaega chuckled. "I hope we aren't boring you too much, Sloane."

She shook her head and looked at the two women at the table with her. "No, sorry. I am just a bit tired. So, have you two decided?"

Elodie nodded. "The location in the scholar's quarter is the best option. It's the only one that will allow us to have a dedicated site for Koren. Having a separate building for the alchemists is a good thing as well. The only concern is having to deal with the Marketbol Guild School."

Adaega shook her head. "That will not be an issue. I agree with Sloane, being in that quarter is ideal. We have one problem that we haven't considered."

Sloane tilted her head. "What is that?"

"You are currently the only one that makes the Runecards work. We have no one else with..." She looked down at her notes. "The Artifice Domain for their magic."

Sloane froze. "And I have to leave."

Adaega nodded. "Precisely."

Sloane swore.

"Don't worry. I think that will be a fun project for Ernald and me to undertake."

Sloane tilted her head in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"We will find someone. Give us a couple of weeks, I know you want to move on as quickly as possible, but..."

Sloane shook her head. "We need to get everyone settled into the center. Elodie, can you work on purchasing the scholar's location? Also decide on the Runecard location, as well. You will be running it, so I trust you. There's also the Vlaredian army to worry about. I should meet with the General."

Nemura looked up from where she had been poking at a bowl of greens. "Lady Sloane. I don't think that is a good idea. You recall how he reacted when you had offered... suggestions the first time."

"You're right. You can ask him for me."

Adaega and Elodie observed their conversation, choosing to remain silent.

Nemura narrowed her eyes. "Fine. I will meet him. Will you please take Stefan with you?"

"He should stay with the others. Speaking of, how goes recruiting of guards?"

"Ernald has narrowed down the requirement to twenty guards and two senior guards. He expects to have everything finalized and prospects chosen within the week."

"Good. We will meet with them once he has selected the team. They can take over security for our people then and we can slowly transition everyone to the Center."

"We will be ready. I can work with Koren and Rel about moving the wagons to the Center after Elodie finalizes the purchase. Then I can start searching for staff," Adaega added.

"Good."

Elodie looked up from her notes. "I will also make the other purchases, although I believe those locations will not be utilized at first. They will sit dormant for some time. Is that acceptable?"

Sloane nodded. "Of course. As long as we have them ready as soon as we need them. I should be able to assist anyone Adaega and Ernald find in setting up the initial batch of cards. We only need one thousand within the year for the test run that Grandmaster Markus wishes to do."

Elodie wrote some notes down but squinted and looked up. "Will the House require a manor or some type of residence for you in the city? I apologize, I did not consider that."

With a shake of her head, she said, "No. It will be some time until I can return I believe. Ensure everyone in the House can have somewhere to live. If this is where I choose to settle after finding Gwyn, then I will find something then."

Sloane sighed. The group continued discussing the details of what needed to be done before they could leave the city. It was a lot, and she wasn't sure how she was going to fit it all in. She was a bit surprised at how calm and unconcerned she was with the prospect of an army approaching the city. She considered if it had to do with her growing ability with mana. No one else she'd seen yet had been able to cast spells like her. *Could I be becoming overconfident? No. I still can't fight worth a shit. Maybe I should start training again.*

She glanced at Nemura, seeing the woman's muscles ripple as she stretched and yawned. *Perhaps I can wait until after we leave. We're too busy right now.*

Elodie and Adaega left after finalizing details and last-minute needs, each heading to perform their assigned tasks. Soon Sloane would actually own something in this world and her connection to Earth was steadily falling further and further away. Her thoughts moved to her daughter as she sat there silently. Brooding over what all Gwyn could be doing.

One of the first things Sloane had done after settling into Marketbol was to make inquiries into any terrans or even just sightings. Surprisingly there were many sightings but not many had been in the city. It seemed like no matter where she went, she was just missing other humans. This time a large group of them had formed up and decided to join the Marketbol army, leaving several weeks prior as the force moved east to reinforce the Sovereigns under attack there. Another group had evidently left as well, not desiring to be in a 'nation' at war. When she inquired as to where the group was going, it seemed they were going to a kingdom named Rosale.

It was a kingdom she'd heard about and knew it would be one of her stops on the way to Avira. She wondered if she would see any of the humans there. With her leaving Adaega behind, ostensibly in Ernard's care, she was leaving the only other human she knew. While she had come to consider the knights her friends and companions, it wasn't the same. Maybe it was that connection to home. Even if Adaega's Earth was different, she was still relatively used to many of the same things Sloane was. If only seventy years behind her. She could discuss a lot more commonalities with the woman than with the knights. It was refreshing.

Sloane sighed.

"Everything alright?" Nemura asked.

Sloane nodded. "Just thinking. There's so much to do. So many places to search. I keep wanting to second guess myself on if I am doing this right. If my priorities aren't misplaced."

Nemura glanced over Sloane's shoulder, her eyes focusing on something behind her. Sloane turned and saw Maud looking at her with concern.

"How do you always find me when I'm feeling this way?"

Maud sat down in the vacated seat to Sloane's right.

Nemura glanced between the two of them and stood up. "I am not good at these talks. I will go and try to gain an audience with the general." She rested her hand on Sloane's shoulder. "That said, Sloane? You're doing the right thing. You have a goal, one that takes you through many key locations. This allows us to get as much information as possible about Gwyn from as many places as possible. Your decision to set up the Center and the other business is sound. You need funds, but you need to also be taken seriously. With enough influence, it will make dealing with other parties smoother. We're here to help you, but you are helping yourself at the same

time. I respect that, and I am sure others will as well. If you keep beating yourself up, it will make it much more difficult. You have a plan, stick to it.”

Sloane patted the woman’s hand. “For what it’s worth, you *are* pretty good at it.”

The woman huffed a laugh as she removed her hand. “I will let you know what he says if I can even meet with the man.”

“Thank you.”

Nemura nodded at Maud. “Ser Maud, I leave her in your care.”

Maud smiled. “Don’t worry about her, Nemura. We’re gonna have some fun.”

The woman nodded. Seeming to relax slightly as she walked away.

Sloane turned and looked at the red-headed telv after her guardswoman left. “So, what’s up?”

“Ismeld is off handling some business for the Order, but the rest of us were about to go grab some drinks at a tavern down the way. Would you like to join us?”

Sloane leaned back in her chair, balancing it on the rear two legs, as she thought. “You know what? Sure. Let’s go. Everyone else is busy, and I have nothing else to do until tomorrow at the earliest.”

Maud smiled and clapped her hands. “Perfect! We haven’t had a chance to chat over ale in a while! You can tell me some more about your Earth stuff. I vaguely recall you saying something about a treat called *gelato*.”

Sloane snorted as she stood. “Girl, let’s go. It’s time I told you about a delectable and divine dessert that we need in our life right now. I am unsure if I have asked, but do you know what *chocolate* is?”

Maud shook her head, and Sloane followed the knight out of the inn.

Sloane gasped. “Oh no. You’re telling me this world doesn’t have chocolate?”

“No? What is that?”

Sloane smiled. “Let’s get an ale, because girl, we have so much to talk about.”

They walked down the sidewalk toward the tavern, moving through the evening crowd. The sun was slowly going down earlier as the seasons changed and there were workers already lighting the oil lamps that lined the street. Sloane followed Maud and the two talked about different types of desserts they enjoyed. Maud pointed out the tavern’s sign and Sloane caught sight of Cristole standing outside waiting. The man waved and Sloane was about to return the gesture but hesitated as she noticed an orkun woman across the street. The woman seemed to be watching Sloane intently, but when she noticed Sloane’s gaze she turned her head and started talking to a telv man that was standing with her.

“Sloane, you came!” Cristole said, causing Sloane to jerk her head back to the front.

“Yeah! Maud told me she’d buy me an ale if I told her all about something we have called chocolate on Earth.”

Cristole tilted his head. “Chocolate? We have that here too. It’s made from cacao, correct Sloane?”

Both Sloane and Maud's eyes shot open. "Yes! That's it!" Sloane said excitedly.

Maud looked confused. "We do? What?"

"Yes, it's a luxury food from Zhaoloka."

Maud groaned. "Of course, it is."

Sloane looked between the two. Any thought of the orkun woman left her mind as she got excited about the possibility of something familiar.

"What's Zhaoloka?"

Cristole gestured to the door of the tavern. Sloane followed along as he explained. "It is an island nation off the coast of the continent to the southwest."

Sloane perked up, thinking about how she would be taking a ship from Swanbrook to Avira and its route along the southern coast. "Oh? Will my ship stop there you think?"

Cristole looked at her with sympathy and shook his head. "No. They are fiercely xenophobic and completely isolationist. I am afraid that you may never get that chocolate."

"W-What? *Never*?" she stammered.

Maud patted Sloane on the back. "Come on, Sloane. Let's get you that drink."

Sloane sighed. "I think I may need more than one."