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## New Acquaintances

“Are you certain it’s wise to go alone?” Nemura’s brow furrowed with concern. Sloane’s friend stood there with her arms crossed next to Mariel as Sloane gathered her things and shoved them into her spatial satchel.

Sloane gave a firm nod. “Yes. Stefan has already arranged a private meeting between the advisor and me. She has a speech at the Arcanum and will meet with me afterward. Besides, Vesper will accompany me, so I won’t be entirely alone.”

“But Mom~! I want to come too,” Mariel’s voice carried a playful whine.

“You, my dear, are due back to your studies. Stefan will be up here soon to take you to a library. Now that you are officially a young lady, ignorance isn’t a luxury you can afford. Unfortunately, you do not have the benefit of just waving away knowledge by saying you’re human like myself. So, that means we have to get you back in the books.”

Mariel’s face scrunched in disbelief. “What? No, Mom, you can’t be serious!”

“Very serious,” Sloane affirmed with a nod and a hint of amusement in her voice.

Mariel emitted a sound that was half groan, half protest—a noise that seemed to come from deep within her. She sounded a bit like a wounded moose. Sloane couldn’t help but smile; she had perhaps been lenient with Mariel’s education during their travels. But now, with everything cleared up with the church, and Mariel now legally her daughter... she had really no excuse.

Not to mention that there were no monsters or armies or any other threats within the safety and stability of Calling. So she was determined to ensure her daughter was well-prepared. Knowledge, after all, was a critical ally.

“And when I return, we’ll dive into your math and science lessons. You have quite a bit to catch up on,” Sloane continued, watching Mariel’s reaction.

“Ugh,” the teenager groaned theatrically, but Sloane could tell her kid’s heart wasn’t in it when she saw the hint of a smirk. She loved science. Especially after she learned that most people wouldn’t know the things that Sloane was teaching her. That got her to perk right up.

She ruffled Mariel’s hair and smiled down at her. “I’ll be back later. Love you,” she said before kissing the top of her daughter’s head.

Her daughter playfully pushed away Sloane’s hand and sighed. “Love ya too, mom.”

## Manabound - Resilience

Sloane gave Nemura a reassuring nod and motioned for Vesper to tag along. Together, they stepped out into the bustling city, merging with the flow of people.

They navigated through the streets of Calling, the pair garnering attention yet not quite stirring fear as they once might have. The field of enchanting was popping here in Calling and almost every day some new stand would sprout up selling the hottest new items. Whatever the enchanting equivalent of snake oil salesmen definitely applied to the situation.

Sloane had learned a bit about Alyce Maxwell from Stefan's information gathering. One thing was that she called herself human as opposed to terran which was telling. She had a firm grasp of industrial concepts if her initiatives were anything to go by. She also seemed to not get along terribly well with nobility and apparently she was *very* close with the king. Who was considered a very eligible bachelor.

*So, potential minefield there. Don't want to piss off the girl with a powerful boyfriend.*

Reaching the Arcanum was fairly easy, it was a large building that apparently was an old palace in the center of the city that had been gutted and reworked into the scholarly place it was today.

As she approached, the sight of Vesper at her side seemed to command a certain respect or perhaps fear, as the guards at the entrance barely spared her a second glance, too fixated on the formidable golem. Sloane made a mental note to discuss these apparent security oversights with the advisor she was about to meet. They proceeded through the corridors, the presence of the large feline forcing scholars and visitors to press against the walls, their eyes wide with a mix of awe and apprehension.

After briefly stopping to ask for directions, Sloane found her way to a grand hall, once a royal ballroom now converted into an auditorium for lectures and speeches. She slipped inside, the echoes of her footsteps mingling with the hushed whispers of the gathered crowd.

As she entered, an official-looking woman approached her and addressed her in a lowered voice as a man spoke on stage. "Miss, this area is reserved for—" Her words faltered as Vesper followed Sloane through the door, her towering form causing the woman to take a step back, her eyes wide with trepidation.

"Miss..." she began again, her voice quivering.

With a reassuring smile, Sloane leaned forward, whispering back, "I'm here to meet with Miss Maxwell after her presentation. I believe there's been some arrangement made."

The official's expression shifted from confusion to realization. "Ah! Baroness Reinhart, is it? Yes, I spoke with Mister Stranca. Please, find a seat. Miss Maxwell will be addressing the audience after one more speaker."

Offering a nod of thanks, Sloane motioned for Vesper to settle in an unobtrusive corner at the back of the room, where she curled up and got comfortable. Sloane then took a seat in the last row, her gaze scanning the room, as the man on stage started finishing up whatever presentation he was giving.

His voice droned on, punctuated by the occasional polite applause or a murmur of interest. Then, as his topic wound down, he asked the audience for questions, and several people immediately stood up.

As the man fielded questions, Sloane couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at some of the inquiries tossed his way. One audience member asked a question so deeply entrenched in a rabbit hole of theoretical magic that had no relation to what the man had said that it left her feeling utterly lost. Another seemed more concerned with the speaker's personal life than the subject matter at hand. Sloane leaned back, her lips twitching into an amused smirk, wondering about the kinds of personalities that thrived in such an academic atmosphere.

*Maybe this world wasn't quite ready for all of this.*

Finally, the man concluded and stepped off stage and Sloane found herself looking around, seeing most were just as bored as she was. While the audience politely applauded, two women then made their way to the stage. The first, a young woman with pink ombre hair cascading down her shoulders and warm brown eyes, carried herself with an effortless confidence that immediately drew the room's attention. She didn't bother with an introduction, but Sloane had a hunch this was Alyce Maxwell.

She stood no taller than one-sixty-five centimeters, her attire consisting of a fitted jacket paired with heavy fabric pants, ready for a day's work and not a presentation. It was as if she had just come from work, and didn't care to change before arriving.

Looking around at the nicely dressed people in the audience, it appeared to be something everyone was used to.

The young woman cleared her throat, the murmurs in the room dying down. "Thank you, everyone. As you know, I won't be the main event today," she began, her voice steady and sure. "That honor is left to a brilliant mind and a dear colleague of mine." She gestured to the woman next to her, a slightly taller figure with an air of quiet strength about her.

The woman nodded at Alyce's introduction, and as she stepped forward, Sloane figured she was Japanese. "Thank you, Alyce." Sloane smiled. *I'm so good.* "My name is Hina Takahashi," she said, her accent a gentle lilt that confirmed Sloane's guess. As Alyce stepped back, Hina took center stage, her presence equally compelling.

Hina began to speak about her latest project, her words painting a vivid picture of the research and development that had gone into it. She described an elixir derived from the same root used in

traditional root tea, but with an effort to go beyond just hormone management. “This elixir is part of a structured treatment designed for trans women,” she explained, her voice carrying a note of pride. “It’s meant to provide a more holistic and effective hormone treatment that, frankly, is only possible due to magic.”

Sloane found herself leaning forward, drawn in by the obvious passion and dedication Hina poured into her work. It was a topic she hadn’t expected to encounter here, but the potential implications of such a treatment were clear. If it worked as Hina described, it could change lives.

When she concluded her talks and opened the floor to questions, Hina, like the previous man, was asked all sorts of things—starting with what it meant to be trans. Which after being described was, surprisingly, something already known and simply termed differently among the people of Eona.

After the woman finished and there were no further questions, Sloane could see that the woman had lost a bit of her confidence as Alyce stepped forward and whispered to her. The woman nodded and Alyce smiled at the crowd. “Hina’s team has even started research into more intensive magical applications, isn’t that right?” she asked the other woman.

The woman nodded, her smile returning. “We are! We are far from even experimental applications, but we are looking into the feasibility of using magic to completely transform a body. A sort of permanent polymorph. There have been rumors of magical creatures that can transform from an animal body into an elvenoid form.”

After she left the stage, Alyce made some closing remarks and stepped off the stage to start talking with people. Sloane just sat there and waited, allowing the people to slowly trickle out. She started thinking about what she could accomplish with the limited time she had before departing the city. Who knew how many opportunities she’d have to work on things.

*Maybe I can rent a place to use as a workshop for winter?*

Sloane was startled when someone slid into the seat next to her. “Rust, these things are always so stuffy,” remarked a voice, breaking through her thoughts. Sloane turned to find herself face to face with Alyce Maxwell, the woman of the hour.

“Uh, hi. Sorry, I didn’t see you sitting down,” Sloane stammered slightly, taken aback by the sudden company.

Alyce’s smile was warm and genuine. “No worries! You looked like you were really lost in thought.” She offered a hand, which Sloane shook. “I’m Alyce. I’ve been eager to meet you, especially after hearing about that impressive feline companion of yours.”

Sloane chuckled softly. “That would be Vesper. And she’s more of a lazy cat than anything.”

“She’s certainly something.”

Alyce laughed. “Well, she's quite the housecat. So, Sloane, what are your plans for the rest of the day? I'm actually looking forward to heading back to my workshop. I've got a few things I'm itching to work on, but I'd love to show you around first, and maybe chat about your work. Oh, rusting bolts, I'm rambling, aren't I? I tend to do that when I'm excited or nervous. Noble titles and formalities never sat right with me, not even back in Onyxhallow. That place was more about what you could do than who your parents were.”

Sloane listened, her earlier apprehension easing as Alyce spoke. There was something refreshing about her candidness and obvious passion for her work. She had been curious, but the things she said and the way she spoke explained a bit of the woman's origin. *Definitely not from the same Earth then,* Sloane thought as she wondered about the place Alyce mentioned. *Never heard of a town or city called Onyxhallow. Sounds more fantasy than here, actually.*

“So, what do you say we get outta here and we can head over to my workshop?”

“I'd like that,” Sloane agreed. “I've got a bit of time before I need to return to my daughter. She's got quite the schedule, and we're starting on her math and science lessons soon.”

Alyce's eyes widened slightly. “Your daughter? You had someone come with you?”

“Well, I did, but the one I'm speaking of is my adopted daughter. She's raithe, so... from here.”

“That's wonderful! I'd love to hear more about her. Let's head to my workshop, and you can tell me all about her on the way.”

As they exited the auditorium together, Sloane felt a flicker of hope. The woman was the advisor to the king, so maybe Sloane could use that connection to help get them passage. Maybe this meeting, this connection, could be the key to speeding up their journey. And as they walked, Sloane found herself opening up, she talked about Mariel without getting overly specific, and certainly not about her daughter's magic. Alyce listened intently, her own excitement and curiosity evident in her every response. Alyce started talking about her work, and how Rosale had become a new home for her. Sloane couldn't help but feel that, despite the uncertainty of their path, this moment, this connection, was exactly what they needed.

They continued their talking through the streets, and Sloane definitely found herself enjoying the younger woman's energy. Then they reached the palace grounds, which spread out impressively before them.

“Your workshop is here?” she asked.

The guards clearly noticed her as they let the two of them in.

“My workshop isn't actually in the palace,” Alyce explained as they walked along a path that skirted the main buildings. “But the king was gracious enough to have one built for me after a while.

Said something about keeping 'innovative minds' close." Her tone carried a touch of amusement and pride.

*Yeah, I bet that's all it was.*

They approached a large, standalone building nestled against the edge of the palace grounds. As they entered, Sloane was immediately struck by the size of the workshop. It was vast, filled with various tools, materials, and half-finished projects that spoke of a busy, creative mind at work. Some people were working on projects while others were carrying things out a door in the back.

It was very nice, and exactly like something she'd want. It reminded her of Aila's workshop, but larger. The workshop in Marketbol was a bit more Sloane's style, but what Alyce had was great.

"You haven't seen anything yet," Alyce remarked with a smirk, noticing Sloane's impressed whistle.

Sloane raised an eyebrow, curious about what else could possibly surprise her in this place. She followed Alyce through another door that led outside, onto a balcony overlooking a sprawling field adjacent to the palace. And there, dominating the view, was a skyship that looked as if it had flown straight out of the pages of a steampunk novel.

Sloane's breath caught in her throat. The ship was a magnificent sight, its hull resting on a wooden frame that kept it from falling over. It looked just like a normal twin sailed ship with gold accents along its dark wood exterior. At least until you looked at the two massive propellers attached to the side with some steam rising from vents at the front. It looked like an old caravel style ship, but with, of course... propellers.

It was gorgeous.

She couldn't keep the awe out of her voice. "Holy. Shit."

"Sloane Reinhart, meet the *Wanderlust*."



"No way. So, you're telling me the enchanting ink we've been sourcing from Marketbol is actually from your company?" Alyce asked with no shortage of disbelief.

Sloane nodded as she sipped at the aromatic coffee that Alyce had introduced her to. They were seated at a quaint cafe just on the fringes of the palace, a place where the morning light gently kissed the cobblestones. The robust flavor of the coffee was a welcome reminder of Earth, a luxury Sloane had sorely missed. It was no cappuccino from her favorite *caffè* in her town in Italy, but it would do. At least it was better than the dirty dishwasher that was American coffee.

Over the past week and a half, their meetings had become a regular occurrence, and Sloane found herself genuinely enjoying the company and the conversations that sprouted from their shared interests.

*I really need to figure out where they get their coffee from.*

“Yep, that’s right. Marketbol is a hub for our elixirs and runic business. I’ve got another center set up in Nornport that’s been spearheading our operations here in Rosale. It’s where we plan to craft more artifice-centric items,” Sloane explained.

Alyce shook her head, still grappling with the revelation. “That’s incredible. You’ve truly made strides since arriving. I’ve been mostly anchored here in Calling, though we’ve managed to achieve some breakthroughs. Of course, I couldn’t have done it without Tanyth—Oh, rust. I mean the king.”

Sloane’s chuckle was light, but her curiosity piqued. “You seem quite familiar with him.”

The blush that bloomed on Alyce’s cheeks could’ve rivaled the morning’s first light. “I—Uh... About the ink, how much for the recipe?”

Sloane raised an eyebrow, her lips curving into a knowing smile. “Been trying to replicate it, huh?”

Alyce’s fingers tapped an impatient rhythm on the table, her frown betraying her frustration. “Yes, but we’re missing a key element. The ink we used on the *Wanderlust* fades too quickly under prolonged mana strain. It limits our flights to an hour, tops.”

“You’re remarkably forthcoming with all of this,” Sloane observed. “You know, if I were less scrupulous—”

Alyce waved the concern away. “While my sister Kat was the more social one, I’ve also got a good read on people. Besides, anyone who crosses me has the king to answer to.”

*Well, there’s that.*

Sloane hummed in agreement. “Well, the recipe isn’t for sale, but I’ll write to Adaega about ramping up production. We might even set up a facility here in Rosale, but the ingredients aren’t locally sourced, and that’s probably why your reverse engineering attempts have hit a wall.”

Alyce exhaled a sigh of resignation. “Of course. That’s... disappointing. Without a proper supply, the *Wanderlust* is more grounded than I’d hoped. In hindsight, moving away from a dirigible design may have been premature.”

Sloane leaned in, lowering her voice. “What’s really on your mind, Alyce? You’ve been dancing around it all week.”

Alyce hesitated before laying her cards on the table. She needed Sloane’s expertise. Her own strengths lay in broader engineering feats, but the finer points of rune crafting were not her forte. She

wanted Sloane's help and was willing to negotiate for it. The king also had an interest in acquiring golems that could safeguard settlements from the monster threat.

Sloane promised to review their setup but made it clear she would expect something in return. Alyce eagerly agreed, expressing her desire to make a real difference in Rosale, her adopted homeland.

As they chatted, Sloane noticed a familiar device on Alyce's arm, partially concealed by her sleeve.

"What's that you've got there?" Sloane inquired. "I don't think I've seen you wear that at all this week."

"Oh, this?" Alyce said, pulling back her sleeve to reveal the device. "It's an Excerpt Reader. The king bought it for me, but he prefers to keep it secure in the vault unless I'm going to be using it. It's quite unique, you see."

Sloane hid her amusement behind a sip of coffee. "Interesting," she mused, rolling up her sleeve to reveal her own Excerpt Reader. "Looks quite similar to mine."

Alyce's eyes widened, taking in Sloane's device, her expression a mix of shock and intrigue.

"W-What?"

Sloane couldn't suppress her chuckle. "That's our design. Aila and I crafted it and then auctioned it off in Nornport. The king sure invested heavily in that piece."

"Rust..." Alyce exhaled a breath that held a hint of exasperation and respect. "You really know your craft, don't you?"

Sloane nodded, pride swelling in her chest. "I was involved in similar work back on Earth. No magic, but the principles remain the same. We created devices that reached across the globe, and I played a significant part in their design."

"Rust, that's..." Alyce trailed off, clearly impressed.

"Let's see what we can do about the *Wanderlust*, then," Sloane offered, rising from her seat. "Lead the way, Alyce."

The two women exited the café, stepping back into the streets of Calling, ready to tackle the challenges of enchantments and skyship flights. This woman had brought flight to Eona, and Sloane wanted in. Especially if she could help Alyce with her runic problem, maybe she could secure a passage on the skyship to Avira, which would be much faster. With Sloane's expertise and Alyce's ingenuity, the sky was not the limit—it was the beginning.

Alyce led Sloane back toward the palace, their conversation meandering through topics of magic and mechanics. As they approached the palace grounds, the energy of the city seemed to ebb



slightly, giving way to the more structured and manicured beauty of royal domains. Alyce guided Sloane with a confident stride, her excitement palpable as they neared the heart of her inventive world.

The skyship loomed before them, its presence a majestic testament to innovation. Alyce beamed with pride, her eyes alight with the reflection of her creation. "Prepare to be amazed," she said, her voice tinged with a playful boast.

Sloane followed Alyce up a series of ramps and platforms, each step bringing them closer to the ship. Its hull was a marvel of craftsmanship, the wood polished to a gleam, the golden accents intricately woven into elegant designs that spoke of both luxury and adventure.

Alyce announced as they stepped aboard. "Isn't she a beauty?"

Sloane could only nod, her usual eloquence failing her in the wake of such splendor. The deck was spacious, the sails, although furled, promised a powerful grace when unfurled, and the propellers, now silent, hinted at the raw power they contained.

Alyce started the tour, her words a cascade of technical details and personal anecdotes. They explored the helm, where the wheel stood like a silent captain awaiting orders. The navigation room was a trove of maps and instruments, the walls adorned with etchings of stars and constellations. Below deck, the crew's quarters were modest but comfortable, each bunk neatly made, each locker closed.

The engine room was where Alyce's passion truly ignited. She explained the intricacies of the propellers' mechanisms, the steam vents, and the enchantments that held it all together. She pointed out the few key areas where they used the ink that Sloane's company provided, its significance now even more apparent to Sloane.

As they stood there, surrounded by the hum of potential energy, Sloane felt a kinship with Alyce. They were both pioneers in their own right, women of Earth who had found purpose in this world.

Alyce's gaze met Sloane's, a silent question hanging in the air between them. "What do you think? Can you help make the *Wanderlust* soar as she was meant to?"

Sloane's reply was a determined smile. "Let's make her fly."



Sloane collapsed into the chair beside Stefan with a weary sigh, the wooden frame creaking under her sudden weight. The bustling pub connected to the inn thrummed with the evening's revelry, but her focus narrowed to the barmaid setting down a fresh mug of ale for Stefan. With a grin, she snatched the

mug before he could object and took a hearty gulp, the liquid a welcome balm to her fatigue. “Thanks,” she said, the word half-drowned in her quenching drink.

Stefan, suppressing a smile at her antics, gave the returning barmaid a resigned nod. “Seems my friend’s thirst outpaces her manners. Might we trouble you for another?”

The barmaid’s laughter was a melodic counterpoint to the clink of tankards and the murmur of conversations around them. She departed with a promise of a swift return.

The hearth was crackling, the fire roaring to keep out the evening chill from outside. It looked like that hearth was the hardest working thing in the room at the moment.

“So, how did things go with your new friend?” Stefan inquired, his curiosity barely masked by his casual tone.

A broad smile unfurled across Sloane’s face. “Alyce? Fascinating. She’s a whirlwind of ideas. But gods, I’m spent.” She snatched a handful of nuts, the salt and crunch a perfect companion to the ale’s bitterness.

“So, what brings you here? We haven’t talked much lately unless you need something.”

Sloane frowned. “I’m sorry, Steffy. I’m a horrible friend. But really, I just saw you and wanted to come hang out before heading upstairs. Tell me, what’s on your mind?”

Stefan’s gaze trailed over the pub’s patrons, not from suspicion but to track the approach of his drink. As the barmaid returned, a gentle flirtation played out, but Stefan navigated the dance with grace, steering her back to her duties with a polite deflection. Sloane’s eyes widened—Stefan’s transformation from ladies’ man to gentleman was still a sight to behold.

The Blade scoffed at her. “Really? You know I’ve been making a point to move away from all of that.”

“You’re serious about this change,” she said, the statement more of an admiring observation than a question.

Stefan’s smile was a quiet thing, small but meaningful. “I am. There are things—people—worth changing for.”

The mention of Liora brought a softer expression to his face, one that spoke of quiet yearnings and patient resolve. “She writes,” he shared, the words carrying a weight of affection.

Sloane leaned in, her voice low and sincere. “If you need to chase what’s in your heart, Stefan—”

He cut her off with a gentle shake of his head. “Not yet. My place is here, ensuring your journey is seen through. Liora understands. Afterwards? Sure, I may return here to Rosale to look after your interests.”

She nodded, the two of them falling into silence as they returned to their drinks.

“Have you considered where you and Gwyn will go? After everything?” he asked.

“Honestly? I am not sure. I need to figure out exactly what the situation is with Gwyn’s House. That may force me to stay in Avira, but I just really don’t know.”

“I’ve been looking into transportation. It will be affordable for us come spring.”

“I don’t think we’ll need to worry about that. I’ve made a deal with Alyce to help her, and I’m going to ask for help with getting to Avira.”

“I’ll leave it to you then.”

After that, they just discussed what the two of them had been up to. Stefan talked about how he finished all of the work with the Banking Guild for her. One of the things they’d brought in the wagon was Rune Card terminals and cards for the guild in the capital, and over the past several weeks Stefan had been working with them to get it all set up.

Luckily, they didn’t need her help to do so.

The clinking of plates and the aroma of seasoned meat filled the space between Sloane and Stefan as their conversation took a pause, giving way to the simple pleasure of a hearty meal in a crowded pub. Sloane savored a juicy cut of beef, letting the flavors burst across her palate, while Stefan’s questions about what she’d been up to hung in the air, waiting for her to swallow and respond.

As they ate, Sloane painted a vivid picture of the airship, livening up her descriptions so Stefan could almost feel the wind on his face from its imagined flight. She wanted him to be so impressed that he would want to go full on Leo at the bow.

But then his questions were... boring and focused on potential tactical or spy uses. Basically, he went full on Blade operative.

She sighed.

It was then that Nell and her fellow paladins entered the room. Sloane raised her hand in greeting, and Nell nodded back with a smile before joining her company at another table next to theirs.

“Evening, Sloane, Stefan,” Nell called over, her voice carrying over the din.

“Evening, Nell,” Sloane replied, raising her mug in a toast to the paladin’s day of rest.

Nell grinned and gestured to her fellow paladins. “Seems like we’re all in need of a bit of unwinding. How’s the meal?”

“Excellent as always,” Stefan answered. “Join us if you’ve the mind to.”

With a shake of her head, Nell declined. “Another time. We’ve plans for the night. A bit of camaraderie and relaxation. Duty calls early on the morrow.”

Sloane tilted her head. “What duty?”

Nell's expression shifted into a mock glare directed at Stefan. “You didn't tell her, did you?”

Stefan, caught in his omission, raised his palms in surrender. “It slipped my mind, I confess.”

She sighed. “All the paladins in the city must convene tomorrow for drills, tactical refreshers, and the yearly muster. We managed to get out of them last year, but no such luck here.”

Sloane nodded. It seemed that everywhere you went, recurring training was a thing.

Their conversation meandered through various topics, from the mundane to the profound, occasionally punctuated by laughter from the paladin's corner. As the evening waned, so did Sloane's energy, culminating in a wide yawn that she could no longer suppress.

She pushed her empty plate away, signaling the end of the meal, and the conversation. “I think it's time for me to turn in.”

Stefan also took that as a cue to leave, and he, too, stood to retire. Side by side, they ascended the stairs, their footsteps a companionable echo in the quieting common room. At the landing, they parted ways with a brief, knowing nod, each to their own sanctuary of solitude.

Upon entering her room, Sloane was met with the soft clattering of bones. Mariel was deep in concentration, her black mana swirling around as she meticulously assembled what appeared to be the skeletal structure of some small creature. Sloane just knew someone was in for a surprise soon.

*Hopefully, not me.*

“Another nocturnal project, Mar?” Sloane inquired, her voice a lullaby of weariness.

Mariel glanced up, a flicker of guilty delight in her eyes. “Just a little sidekick for Ser Boney. They get lonely, you know?”

Sloane couldn't help but smile at her daughter's imagination. “Just make sure you get some rest too, okay?”

“I will, Mom,” Mariel promised, though they both knew the pull of a passion project often outstripped the need for sleep.

With a final goodnight, Sloane retreated to the comfort of her bedchamber. The day's garments fell away, replaced by the soft embrace of her pajamas. As she sank into the welcoming depths of her bed, the day's exertions coalesced into a heavy cloak that drew her swiftly toward slumber.

“Night, Mar,” she murmured into the dimness, her words barely a whisper before sleep claimed her, drawing a curtain on the world.



A couple of days later, the cafe was swamped with the mid-morning rush, the lovely scent of freshly brewed coffee filled the air along with the sound of lively chatter. Sloane pushed the door open, the familiar jingle announcing their arrival. A few paces in, she spotted Alyce, who stood with an expectant smile upon seeing them approach.

“Alyce, I’d like you to meet my daughter,” Sloane introduced, gesturing to Mariel who bounced slightly on the balls of her feet, her enthusiasm barely contained.

Mariel extended her hand with an eager grin at the woman who stood at the same height as her. “Hi! I’ve heard so much about you!”

Alyce’s smile widened as she took Mariel’s hand in both of hers, her eyes bright with genuine delight. “The pleasure is all mine! Your mother has talked about you nonstop and how talented you are. I’m thrilled to finally meet you.”

Mariel’s eyes sparkled at the compliment. “Thanks! Mom’s told me about the cool stuff you do too. She says you’re brilliant with machines and stuff!”

Sloane watched the exchange with a warm heart, feeling a swell of pride for both her daughter and the rapport they were building with Alyce. It was moments like these that made the chaos of their journey worth it—forging connections and building a future.

Alyce laughed, her gaze flicking between Sloane and Mariel. “Well, I hope I can live up to the hype. Why don’t we sit? I’ve ordered some pastries and coffee, but if you’d prefer something else, just let me know.”

As they settled into their seats, Sloane couldn’t help but notice the easy way Alyce engaged Mariel, treating her with the same respect as any adult. It was a relief, knowing her daughter was seen and appreciated for who she was, not just as a teenager or an extension of herself.

“So, Mariel, are you enjoying the city?” Alyce asked, her interest sincere as she leaned forward, resting her chin on her palm.

Mariel nodded vigorously, her ponytail bouncing. “Yes! Mom and I went shopping yesterday. I found some clothes that are just so me, and, a new sword! Uh...” Her voice trailed off as Sloane coughed pointedly.

Alyce’s eyebrows rose. “A new sword?”

Cringing just a tad, Mariel hurried to cover her slip. “Yep! It’s for my friend. I’m planning it as a surprise gift. Mom’s going to enchant it for me.”

Alyce looked between them in confusion for a bit then shrugged.

Sloane rolled her eyes but let out a fond sigh, her gaze softening as the waitress approached with their order. The rich aroma of coffee filled the space between them as Sloane took a grateful sip, her expression melting into contentment. “Mar, remind me to buy some coffee beans or even grounds before we leave. I need a decent stash to take with us.”

Mariel, after her initial frown at the taste of the coffee, brightened up as Sloane fixed it to her taste by adding some milk. She gave a thumbs up after trying it a second time before diving into her pastry.

Alyce watched them with a chuckle, clearly amused by their dynamic. “I’m not a fan of black coffee either, Mariel. Back home, we used to mix it with not only milk but sugar and ice.”

“Oh, I could go for a good latte right now. And I miss cappuccinos. I wonder...” Sloane mused aloud, turning back to Mariel. “Mar, grab your notebook.”

Obediently, Mariel pulled her notebook from her satchel, along with a pen that Sloane had made her for her birthday this year. “Got it.”

“Invent a mana-based espresso machine. Oh, and a grinder.”

Scribbling down the note, Mariel looked up, poised for more. “Anything else?”

“Not yet,” Sloane replied with a smile, closing her eyes for a moment to savor the pastry’s sweet tang. It reminded her of a cherry danish and was quite delicious.

*I think I may miss this cafe.*

“You two are absolutely adorable,” Alyce commented, her eyes crinkling with delight.

Sloane chuckled, brushing off a crumb from her lip. “Sorry, I get carried away sometimes.”

“Sometimes...?” Mariel teased, her tone playful.

“A lot of the time,” Sloane admitted, giving her daughter a conspiratorial wink before turning back to Alyce. “So, Alyce, what did you want to talk about?”

“Well, these coffee chats have been a highlight for me, so I suggested we meet here. But there’s more. I spoke with Tanyth last night, and he expressed a desire to meet you,” Alyce said with a slight shrug.

Mariel tilted her head, a small frown marring her features. “Who’s Tanyth?”

Exhaling slowly, Sloane clarified, “She means the king, Mar. He wants to meet us.”

“Oh.”

Alyce rolled her eyes as her gaze flicked between the two. “Oh come on, it won’t be that bad.”

*Well, hopefully, he doesn’t think I’m a queen... That will get awkward.*