
The Council of Guilds

From Iris's vantage point, the transformation of the quill into the paladin's blade was nothing short of astonishing. Her initial shock was replaced by a rush of exasperation and mild amusement especially since it had finally happened to someone other than her. But, of all the mischievous and borderline dangerous antics her sister had pulled, this had to be among the top. She had known Akane long enough to expect the unexpected, but there were times when the kitsune truly outdid herself. Pissing off a paladin was not something Iris wanted to deal with.

Especially not before she actually became the Grandmaster of the Adventurer's Guild.

So she did the most reasonable thing she could do. She focused on the person who should have known better, "Mocha, what did you two do?"

Iris's best friend's sun elf form was a smidge shorter than her and had a clearly guilty look and a bit of annoyance that flashed in her eyes every time she glanced at Akane.

So, she didn't realize what the sword was.

Iris glanced at Kaira who had an agitated expression on her face as well.

She's going to be the one that has to quell any tempers.

The adventurer turned to Akane and fixed the kitsune with a death stare. At least she hoped it was a death stare because the damned fox's beaming smile didn't even twitch.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward, her boots making a soft thud on the wooden floor. "You realize," she began slowly, her voice a careful mix of stern and curious, "that this isn't just any blade. I'm assuming you weren't given it freely," she said while gesturing toward the sword in Mocha's hand.

Akane's eyes sparkled with mischief. "It looked pretty," she replied nonchalantly.

Iris pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to muster some patience. "Akane, 'it looked pretty' is not a good reason to—"

Mocha who apparently realized where it came from, gently placed the sword on a nearby table and fixed Akane with a glare.

"You, *sister*, are a jerk."

Akane gasped. "Only fun! Not mean!"

"They blame me!"

“They know it was me!”

“But I was... guilty by...” Her brows furrowed in frustration, so Iris finished for her.

“Association. And yes. Because I asked you two to stay with Neri. I don't want anything to happen to either of you because of your... origin.”

Mocha groaned.

Kaira stepped forward. She looked from one magical woman to the other, and then, with a sigh, she turned her gaze to Akane. “Just because it's fun doesn't mean it's without consequence.”

Iris nodded, rubbing her temples. “Exactly. This isn't just about us. Actions have consequences. And right now, every move we make will be scrutinized more than ever. I am literally going to be meeting the Council of Guilds here soon.”

Akane looked down, her playful demeanor replaced by one of chagrin. “Sorry...” she mumbled.

Mocha crossed her arms. “How to fix this?”

The inn's door creaked open, sending a gust of wind through the room as a woman in gleaming red armor confidently strode in, her grip firm on a seemingly benign stick. Iris shot a glance at Mocha, her thoughts racing.

“Looks like we're going to get our chance.”

Kaira muttered a curse under her breath while Iris instinctively held up a hand to halt her friends, moving forward to intercept the armored woman. “Praetor! What a surprise! How are you today?”

The Praetor's piercing gaze remained undeterred. “Where is she?”

Iris cleared her throat, trying to keep her composure. “Okay, before you jump to conclusions—”

“Miss Stuart,” the Praetor interrupted with an exasperated yet calm tone. “Your companion stole my property. While I blame myself for being careless, I still expect my belongings returned.”

Iris's gaze followed the Praetor's to the table where the contested sword lay. Next to it, a grinning Akane was trying to remain inconspicuous, which was a task in itself. “Akane, for the love of... that better be the actual sword.”

In response, Akane sheepishly placed a fork beside the sword and with a slight flourish, lifted the illusion that dissolved in motes of yellow mana. What was once a fork now resembled the ornate sword, while the previous sword now bore the humble appearance of basic inn-variety cutlery.

Iris took a deep breath, battling her frustration. “Akane, I think it's best you go upstairs with Kaira for now.”

Akane's fox ears drooped in a clear sign of her guilt. "Sorry..."

"We'll discuss this later," Iris promised, her voice strained.

Kaira exchanged a concerned glance with Iris before placing a comforting hand on Akane's shoulder, guiding her to the inn's staircase.

Facing the Praetor, Iris began, "Praetor, I genuinely apologize for—"

The paladin held up a hand, signaling her to stop. "Miss Stuart. No... Iris, may we sit and discuss this?"

Iris nodded appreciatively. "Of course. Shall we find a table? Maybe share a drink?" She hesitated before adding, "Can you actually drink as a paladin?"

The Praetor chuckled lightly. "I had just finished my duty and was headed home to change when the magic on my sword, or rather... stick dissipated. Drinking is acceptable when off-duty."

With that, she gracefully retrieved her sword from the table, sliding it into its sheath. Iris noted the paladin's shoulders relaxing a bit, the strain from the situation easing.

Patrons of the inn watched while whispering amongst their groups as a paladin navigated with the other two women through the space, settling at a corner table. Mocha sat next to Iris and went still as she stared at the paladin with no small amounts of apprehension.

A hurried barmaid quickly jotted down their orders and left, allowing the Praetor to resume. "Let me be clear: I understand that she is different. Honestly, if it was anything else I would have found amusement in it. My sword is not a toy. Especially not... *that* sword. However, I have some words of wisdom for you future grandmaster."

Iris sucked in a breath. She wasn't sure how the paladin knew that at all.

The woman clearly noticed, but continued, "I would suggest having her attend the temple for some schooling. She does not know how to properly integrate into our society and if she is going to, you need to help her."

Turning her attention to Mocha, her gaze sharpened. "And you, young lady. You're clearly more versed in our ways than your... sister. But—"

"Sister?" Iris repeated, surprised. "Mocha, did you tell them that?"

Mocha shook her head vigorously, her expression grave. "No! It what my paper says!"

She hastily pulled out a scroll from her pocket and held it up in front of herself.

The Praetor nodded solemnly. "She means her excerpt. They were allowed to undergo the Ceremony of Paths with the seers. From what little I'm allowed to know, yes, they've been confirmed as sisters."

Confusion clouded Iris's face. "You got your status...and Sister? How is that even possible?"

Without missing a beat, Mocha clarified, "My full name is Mocha Latte Stuart."

The paladin sighed. "Iris, please call me Hana. Mocha, that... is a unique name for a sun elf. Although, you really aren't one are you?"

Iris placed a hand on Mocha's leg to prevent her from answering. "Why are you asking? Look, I know you're important, and are probably good in a fight—"

"I can take her..." Mocha mumbled under her breath.

Yellow mana flashed through Hana's eyes and the woman shook her head. "She really believes that. Just how strong are you Mocha?"

"Mocha, don't answer that," Iris said. "Hana, I respectfully ask you to explain why you want to know about my *best* friend. And apparently sister."

Mocha looked up at her and smiled, her eyes clearly glistening.

Hana shrugged. "She represents something new in our world. The seers were ecstatic and already messengers have rushed off to Emyrea City to meet with the Archpriestess of the Church. I do not mean her harm, but I simply want to know so I can *understand*. You will have no better advocate for her being seen as a true person than the Church. That is... if she is what I suspect."

"And what do you suspect?"

"That your horse became intelligent with the mind of a person and has now taken on the form of a sun elf in some manner. Mocha is not a common name, and others have heard stories of the adventurer with lightning magic and her mighty horse friend that she speaks to."

Iris winced.

"Yes. My true form," Mocha replied before Iris could stop her.

Contrary to what Iris suspected, the paladin just smiled. "Astonishing. Eona has truly blessed you and us through you." She turned to Iris. "I suspect Akane is similar?"

Mocha again answered, "Yes. Her magic give me elf form."

Iris groaned. "Mocha, let's not tell all of our secrets..."

The sun elf'd horse shrugged. "She okay."

Hana bowed her head. "I appreciate you saying that. I suspect that the Church will come up with a test that determines how to acknowledge *people*—and the Hierophant was *very* adamant on that terminology—who began their existence as something other than what we are... familiar with. But! You should also take some schooling. I suggest the Church because we have more discretion than those of the nations of Ikios. It may take some time to work everything out, but I trust in the Archpriestess. She

is truly a woman who will lead us through this great change. I suspect she will be apotheosized upon her journey to Relena one day. With Eona's blessing that day will be many years in the future."

Iris shrugged. "I will admit, Hana, I don't really know anything about the Church. It wasn't the greatest priority for me."

The barmaid gracefully placed their drinks on the worn wooden table, alongside a platter of tavern snacks that emitted an enticing aroma. Mocha's eyes lit up at the sight, and without hesitation, she reached out for a handful.

Hana, with the regal posture of a seasoned warrior, took her mug and sipped the frothy ale contemplatively. After savoring the taste, she addressed Iris, her voice laced with a gentle reproach. "As a terran, it is understandable that you do not know. We have never judged those who lived a life in ignorance of our own world, let alone those who lived in another. I imagine that your world had its own deities, but it's crucial you acquaint yourself with ours now. Given the nature of the new guild you're establishing, both the Church and my Order will soon entrust you with numerous... quests for your prospective members."

A light of understanding shone in Iris's eyes. Lifting her mug, she responded with a grin, "Now that's something I can toast to."

Both women met their mugs in a cheerful clink and then drank deeply, the liquid momentarily silencing the space between them.

Mocha, her cheeks stuffed with snacks, looked at Hana with a mix of curiosity and challenge. "I'm step fifty-one. Am I higher than you?"

Iris and Hana, caught off-guard, choked on their drinks as a spray of ale flew from both of their mouths, showering the table and Mocha's prized snacks.

"My nuts!"

Iris groaned.

Internally, however, she was proud. Her best friend was *strong*, just as she knew she'd be.

Later, when she finally lay down in bed with Kaira to go to sleep, she passed out quickly, and that's when the voice came to her once again. One that woke her up and brought tears to her eyes.

Luckily, her lover didn't wake up to see her cry, even if they were tears of joy.

[Path Milestone — First True Quest Complete!]

[Conditions Met: Trait — Adventurer's Compass obtained!]

[Storm Warden — Step 55 attained!]

And then Iris felt an arm slip over her chest and pull her close to a warm body, followed by the softness of lips on her cheek.

“Go back to sleep, love. I'm here,” came a soft, sleepy voice.

That sent more surges of happiness as she snuggled back into that warmth.

It was perfect.



It took a week for Sera to get them an appointment with the Council of Guilds, then another of waiting for the meeting to take place. That time was spent preparing everything they needed, negotiating for purchasing the Guild Hall, negotiating contracts and membership for staff and adventurers, and lastly showing Neri, Akane, and Mocha around the city.

It was busy, but fun and oh-so relaxing.

In the end, it was time. Everything was ready.

And in the soft morning glow on the day of the meeting, the inn seemed to hum with silent anticipation or at least it seemed to. In reality, it was probably just Iris that was anxious with nervous energy. Iris sat at a table, a steaming cup of tea warming her hands. The room was nearly empty, but she could feel the weight of the day ahead pressing against her shoulders. She had even spent the previous night tossing and turning, haunted by a myriad of dreams, but now she was steeled for what was to come.

I've been preparing for this for so long. Today, it's time.

The process of securing an audience with the Council of Guilds had been a mess, but finally, Guildmistress Valentina had come in with the save and used her authority to force a date. Since then, Iris and Sera had prepared meticulously; from the contract of their desired Guild Hall location to securing the last bits of funding, every piece was in place. They even had signed affidavits from the Banking Guild as proof of their financial readiness. Sera was armed with a cache of documents: employment contracts for potential staff, membership applications from Iris's party, and those from the three adventurers of Stilstead.

She glanced up at the stairs. Before long, Kaira, Sera, and Tanith would come down from their rooms and join her. Only Sera and Iris would represent them at the meeting, but the others would be anxiously waiting, eager to hear about every detail afterward.

The previous three nights had been a whirlwind for Iris.

She had wrestled with ideas for the guild's ranking system, flitting between choices, debating the merits of each. Akane's suggestions based on pranking abilities had been swiftly set aside, and Mocha's fanciful idea of an apple-based merit system had been gently rebuffed.

Her thoughts were a mess, and she'd used up countless sheets of her somewhat expensive paper scribbling down and discarding potential ranking systems.

Letter grades? No, they felt bland and too much like something out of some weeb's isekai fantasy. So, sure, that was Iris... but this was real life; she had to treat it seriously.

Gemstone rankings? Already claimed by the Banking Guild.

Finally, she'd settled on something both time-honored and versatile: materials.

It's timeless and it's traditional. Perfect.

Sure it was another fantasy staple, but it was one that would relate to people here on Eona better. And she could just say she modeled it after the Banking Guild.

No one would be the wiser.

After finalizing the theme, Iris spent the rest of the time collaborating with Praetor Hana and the Hierophant, learning as much as she could about what data the Church had on the range of known steps. They'd also agreed to help with providing a basic version of the Ceremony of Paths to prospective adventurers, but the logistics of that would be something to come later.

Then there was the revelation that Iris stood within the top ten known people, based on the number of steps. That had been a source of immense pride for her and felt like a validation of all of the shit she'd been through.

She'd then structured her ranking system, ensuring it allowed room for her own advancement and those of her peers. *There always needs to be room to grow. And as adventurers climb higher, I can update the ranks to compensate. We don't even know if there is a limit to the steps or not.*

Her eyes landed on the notebook before her, detailing her carefully thought-out system.

Iris took a quiet moment to reflect upon the new tier system she had crafted, a mental blueprint that she hoped would pave the way for future adventurers. *Alright, there are nine ranks in total.* She began ticking them off mentally, her fingers lightly tapping on the tabletop to echo each thought.

Start off simple: wood and stone for those just dipping their toes into the waters of adventuring. The novice tier. Her fingers stilled for a moment, reminiscing on when she just arrived and how clumsy she was. *I really fell off Mocha's back a lot. So much she made a damn ability to keep me on her back.*

She shook her head, trying to contain her smile at the thought. *Anyways, then we go up to the intermediate tier. Good ol' bronze and iron. A good progression, a tangible measure of progress for the noobs.*

She could almost see the determination and ambition in the eyes of the adventurers, pushing to climb higher, driven by the ranks she'd set. Iris was definitely going to have to go on quests every now and then to evaluate teams... yeah, that was it.

And once they've cut their teeth, it's on to the professional tier. That's where the big names start to form. Silver and gold tier adventurers. She shivered as the weight of responsibility began to settle on her shoulders, realizing she'd be responsible for guiding many through these stages.

Following that, the expert tier. That was her domain for now—titanium. *And after? Palladium. God, it feels ambitious even thinking about it, well... maybe not, that's only one step away.*

Finally, a deep exhale as she reached the pinnacle of her system and the crowning jewel. The tier was reserved for the very best, the named rankers, the national celebrities, and the adventuring *Masters*.

Platinum.

A rush of exhilaration washed over her, knowing she'd set a lofty goal for herself as well. *Not just for them, but for me. A beacon to chase, a reason to keep pushing beyond my limits.*

While she'd specified minimum step ranges for each rank, she was going to make sure that everyone must start at the base and climb.

This structure ensured that rank wasn't earned just because of someone's raw step count—for instance, an individual at step sixty in something as silly as 'flower picking' wouldn't unjustly have a higher rank than someone who actually could fight.

Everything had been meticulously designed to measure true ability and worth.

Tanith's silhouette slowly emerged from the shadows of the stairwell. His hair was neatly tied back, revealing his sharp elven features. Catching sight of Iris, his lips curled into a warm smile. He gracefully made his way towards her and sat across the table. "Good morning, Iris. Are you ready?"

Looking up, Iris tried to muster up a confident smile. "I think so! Where's Sera?"

Tanith leaned back slightly, his eyes sparkling with a hint of mischief. "She's upstairs, fussing over every detail. Wants to make sure she looks... impeccable."

Seeing his playful tone, she teased, "Soooo, you and Sera?"

Caught off guard, Tanith's pale cheeks flushed a soft pink. He averted his gaze, but a smile, half bashful and half pleased, peeked through. "Yes," he admitted, his voice carrying a hint of sheepishness. "I am genuinely happy, and I believe she feels the same. I owe you for that."

Iris leaned forward, a sly grin on her face. “Hey, all I did was offer a job opportunity. The whole... *extracurricular* activities between you two was all on you.”

He chuckled softly, appreciating the lightness she brought to the table.

A gentle murmur of voices reached Iris’s ears. Looking up, she spotted Kaira and Sera descending the stairs. Their elegant elven forms moved gracefully, their laughter ringing in tandem. The early morning light glinted off Kaira’s raven hair and contrasted with Sera’s light-brown tresses. The two were engrossed in conversation as they entered the area.

As they neared the table, Sera’s eyes met Iris’s, her face a blend of excitement and apprehension that signaled the weight of the day ahead.

The murmur of their conversation came to a gentle halt as Sera focused her gaze on Iris. “Have you eaten yet?” she inquired, her concern evident in the slight crease between her brows.

Iris offered a nod of affirmation, her fingers drumming lightly on the wooden surface. “Yeah, I’m good to go.” She felt a flutter of nerves.

As the group began to walk toward the door, the sound of footsteps echoed from the stairwell. Akane and Mocha emerged into view with Neri trailing behind them. Mocha’s eyes locked onto Iris, and without hesitation, she made a beeline towards her, her polymorphed form radiating an unusual intensity.

Within moments, Mocha wrapped Iris in a fierce embrace, squeezing tight. “Good luck,” she whispered earnestly.

Iris reciprocated the hug, warmth spreading through her. “Thanks, little *sister*,” she murmured, the term carrying both fondness and a touch of playful sarcasm.

Pulling back slightly, Mocha’s eyes glowed blue with swirling mana even as they shimmered with unshed tears, betraying deep emotions as Iris watched her friend mouth the words of something.

Without warning, she hugged Iris even tighter than before. After a moment, she released the grip and worked her jaw, searching for the right words. “I knew from the start, you were the right human for me.”

That’s a new ability.

Trying to lighten the weight of the moment, she chuckled, even though her nerves tingled. “BFFs?”

Mocha gave an exaggerated roll of her eyes, and teased, “Remember that one time you were drunk and begged me to be your ‘BFF Forever’? Pepperidge Farm remembers.”

Iris groaned, cringing at the memory. “I never should have taught you all those memes. But, in my defense, I was drunk as fuck.”

A soft smile graced Mocha's lips. "You spent a lot of time drunk, Iris. But now? There's a light in your eyes. You've found your happiness. Now, go make your dream come true. I know how much you've wanted it."

Feeling a sudden weight in her chest, Iris managed a weak smile. "Thanks, Mocha. About your name though... we might—"

Mocha interrupted, waving her hand dismissively. "I know where it comes from. I'm well aware of your past lame choices. You had many of them and I stayed by your side. I don't care. The name's special, because it's from you. You're my human, and I cherish it. Now get moving and make us proud. Love you, sis."

Moved beyond words, Iris's vision blurred slightly with tears. "I love you too, Mocha."

Iris nodded to the others, and with that, it was time.

Akane and Neri gave her a thumbs-up as Mocha joined them. It felt good to have so many people who supported and cared about you.



The grand facade of the Merchant Guild's headquarters towered over Iris Stuart and Sera Timrel as they approached. The gleaming stone structure, framed by ornate pillars, radiated opulence. Upon entering, they were greeted by the lush interior: walls adorned with intricate maps depicting trade routes from all corners of the world, vibrant plants breaking the monotony, and ornately carved tables hosting intense discussions between merchants. Guild representatives moved amongst them, assisting, facilitating, or sometimes mediating heated disputes.

To the sides of the vast hall were elegantly designed private rooms. Large glass windows allowed glimpses inside, revealing even more people engaged in confidential discussions. Every detail of the place screamed its primary purpose: business and trade.

In the center stood a large round counter, behind which a middle-aged telv woman offered a welcoming smile. "Welcome to the Merchant Guild! How may we assist you today?"

Sera stepped forward, confidence evident in her posture. "We have an appointment. I am Miss Timrel, and this is Miss Stuart. We're scheduled to meet with the council."

The telv woman's eyes widened, her excitement palpable. "Of course! Most exciting. Oh, this is just a momentous occasion. Ah, you must excuse me. The entire Guild has been abuzz since the Guildmistress informed us of your visit. Please, right this way."

They made their way through the expansive hall, and as they ascended a grand staircase that spiraled to the second floor, Iris couldn't help but notice the curious and excited glances from the guild's staff.

Their eagerness was contagious.

It was a damned good sign.

At the end of a lavish corridor, the woman knocked softly on a wide double door before opening and walking in. "Guildmistress," she announced in a hushed tone, "they've arrived."

From within, a familiar voice resonated, "Good, send them in. We're ready."

As the door opened wider to invite them inside, Iris and Sera were met with a vast room dominated by a long table. Around it sat an array of figures, but what stood out immediately was how the group's vast majority were women.

Classic Lebelia.

Seated authoritatively at the table's head was Guildmistress Valentina. She stood gracefully, extending her arm towards two vacant seats beside her. "Welcome! Please, take your seats here."

"Thank you," Sera acknowledged, leading the way.

Once they settled, with Iris directly next to Valentina, attentive staff placed crystal glasses before them, swiftly filling them with chilled water.

Iris took a moment to survey the room. Sixteen influential faces stared back at her. *That's both more than I expected and fewer than the total number of guilds. Only the big players then.* The realization settled heavily in her chest. She took a deep breath, steeling herself for the discussions ahead.

Guildmistress Valentina remained standing and drew the attention of everyone in the room. The ambient murmur of conversations ebbed, replaced by an expectant hush.

"Thank you for your patience," she began, her voice firm yet welcoming. "Allow me to introduce the two women who stand at the precipice of change. To my left is Iris Stuart, an Adventurer whose tales of bravery and ingenuity have, by now, surely reached even the farthest corners of our Queendom. And beside her, we have Sera Timrel. From the busy trade routes to these esteemed chambers, she has made her mark as a merchant and has now turned her aptitude towards administration."

Valentina paused, letting the weight of the moment settle in. "As everyone here is undoubtedly aware, today we are convened to decide upon the formation of the first new guild in many, many years." She leaned forward slightly, her eyes scanning the attendees. "But let's not mince words or waste time. We're not a bunch of nobles with silver tongues. So, let's get right to it."

With that, the room was filled with a renewed sense of purpose, and the discussions commenced.

One of the prominent guild members at the table leaned forward, her voice measured, “Could you go over your current plan? Specifically, regarding location, staff, and members.”

Sera, with a slight nod, unfurled the documents neatly before her. She held up affidavits that attested to their robust financial standing – a considerable one thousand gold coins in funds. “In addition to the required funding, we have a contract secured for a prime location in the city center. Additionally, contracts for ten committed staff members, and membership applications from eight prospective adventurers—including our Grandmaster,” she added with a gesture to Iris.

“And how does the guild intend to generate revenue?” another member questioned, his eyes scrutinizing. “Also, how will the members earn money?”

“By levying fees for quest postings, with hire fees based on the complexity or difficulty of the quest,” Sera explained. “Furthermore, every quest must have some sort of monetary or equivalent reward provided by the quest giver which our members will claim upon completion.”

Iris chimed in, “Each Guild Hall will also have amenities that may be used and paid for by members. We will provide special services and discounts to higher-ranked members to entice further patronage. One example is we will have a bar, but one specifically tailored for adventurers which keeps potential troublemakers in one contained place. Somewhat like what I hear about the Mercenary's Guild.”

This drew a series of knowing nods from around the table, including a muscled, tattooed woman with the sides of her head shaved who had a big proud grin on her face. *If it wasn't for stats, I dare say she'd break me in two.* Iris drew in a breath. *I'm a taken woman. I'm a taken woman...*

Her mind went to Kaira.

A flash of that blue-eyed, pixie-haired elf with her after the bath filled Iris's mind.

Water dripping...

Yup. All better.

Sera continued detailing their partnership with the Merchant Guild, while Iris chimed in whenever someone asked her a question directly. The understanding was that each branch would contract with a company to manage monster parts and other resources gathered by their members, with the guild obtaining a portion of the profits. “And notably,” Sera added, “The Fenren Trading House has agreed to have a significant presence within our headquarters. This offers another avenue for revenue, of which the guild will take a modest cut.”

Guildmistress Valentina's face brightened with evident satisfaction.

A murmur arose around the room, “And how do you plan to organize your members?”

Iris, with a touch of pride, elaborated on her tier system, likening it superficially to the Banking Guild's system for familiarity.

But her approach drew skepticism.

Sera defended, pointing to the organizational structure of the Blade's Guild. “It's not entirely unprecedented.”

“But the focus on this... mana? We hardly grasp its significance,” a skeptical voice pointed out.

“Mana is the new reality in Eona. It's here to stay and we must stay at the forefront of it, or risk being swept away. It offers many benefits, and it also brings many dangers. Monsters, beasts that have been transformed and turned into bloodthirsty creatures are one such thing. I have fought them, and these are the types of things that adventurers will go after,” Iris confidently explained. She then clarified her coordination with the Church, emphasizing their willingness to work with the guild. “Additionally, the local temple has agreed to aid us in establishing a voluntary baseline for every new member.”

While many heads bobbed in acknowledgment, the concept clearly remained elusive for some.

The room stirred with discord as several council members voiced their skepticism. “It's unnecessary,” one grumbled, a sentiment echoed by several others.

Iris leaned forward, her gaze steely. “Let's not forget,” she began, her voice laden with quiet intensity, “that I have already proven the worth of such adventurers. Need I remind everyone of the Marauder Prince? And his faction? I sought him out, went where the knights wouldn't go, where the guards wouldn't go, and found him in a forest amassing power and forces to overtake this nation. Well, in the end, I was the one that killed him and stopped the danger he posed,” There was a subtle challenge in her eyes, daring anyone to counter her claims.

Around the room, nods and murmurs of approval erupted. They may not have heard much, but the news *was* spreading. But as one crisis was defused, another ignited.

“Why must Brightburn host it?” A skeptical voice pierced the growing consensus. The speaker, a tall, broad-shouldered man, shot a challenging look towards Valentina. “Why bring this unknown element to our city?”

Valentina's response was immediate, her posture upright and defiant. “Are we not proud of Brightburn? Is this not the northern pride of our lands, the jewel of our Queendom?”

Before Valentina could continue, a woman at the opposite end of the table interjected, her tone dripping with suspicion. “What puzzles me is why you'd support this, Valentina. Iris is clearly an outsider. Hell, she's not even from this damned world. She's a terran. By having a grandmaster like her in Brightburn, it disrupts our hierarchy, does it not?”

Iris scowled. "I have been granted citizenship of Lehelia. I am every bit a part of this nation as you. I have bled for the people of this nation ever since I arrived. I am Lehelian, and honestly? I'm damn proud of that. I've met amazing people who have tried their damndest to make their communities better. I have tried to give back to those people, to help them. And in return, they have helped me. I don't care for the politics. I care because I know that I can do good. I know that there are others like me out there who are ready and willing to give their all for not just Lehelia, but for everyone. For everyone who found their backs to a wall and cried out for help. To fight the dangers in the night or hunt the monsters in the forest. Lehelia is my home and it has given me something new, something to be treasured. A family. And love."

Valentina's lips curled into a knowing smile. "I want to say unequivocally that I support it," she began measuredly, "because, like Iris here, I see the sheer potential of such a guild. And I will admit, the merchant in me salivates at the vast profit it promises. I'm haunted by tales of monsters that ravage our lands, threatening our traders, and our people. Who stands against them? Not our cities, not our nobles. When our caravans were undefended in ages past, we birthed the Mercenary Guild. When justice was denied and those we sought to protect were stolen away, the Blades Guild came into existence. When our lands were undefended by skilled protectors, we founded the Guard's Guild. Each time Ikios faltered, the Guilds have risen. We've always sought prosperity, security for all, be it noble or commoner."

The tension in the room was palpable. The high elf woman sitting opposite Iris, who had been eyeing her with undisguised disdain throughout the proceedings, finally voiced her dissent, leveling her gaze at Valentina. "There's too much at stake here. It's preposterous to think we can make such a monumental decision in one sitting. The consequences are far-reaching, and we are but a fraction of the guilds. I move to delay this matter; we should reconvene next spring when we are more informed."

Valentina responded not with words but with a chuckle, her laughter echoing in the room's stillness.

The woman's face reddened, her eyes narrowing in visible offense. "Are you just dismissing our concerns, Valentina?" she demanded, voice icy with accusation.

Valentina shook her head, a wry smile playing on her lips. "Phinara, have you even been listening? Or are you so preoccupied with your plans to take over once I retire?"

Phinara's scoff was one of genuine disbelief. "That is an absurd insinuation," she retorted, visibly affronted.

Valentina leaned forward, capturing everyone's attention. "Whether we approve it or not, Brightburn will have its Adventurer's Guild. Lehelia is in dire need of some international clout, and we cannot afford to be dismissed in these changing times. Our nation is small; we lack native guilds. And

it's painfully obvious that Lady Arden's influence is at play here." She paused, fixing a piercing stare on Phinara. "Your reasons for opposing this venture are clear to me, though I won't air them here. But know this: Lady Arden will ensure this guild's establishment, even if she has to shove it down our throats."

Phinara bristled, her voice rising with indignation. "She has no authority to do such a thing."

Valentina smirked, leaning back into her chair. "Oh, she has every right. It would simply be unofficial by our standards, but do you truly believe our Queen wouldn't endorse this? The Crown's relations with the Cities have always been... intimate, to say the least. Do you doubt she could easily sway one of our Grandmasters to supersede our verdict? It's sheer folly to assume we have the upper hand here."

She paused, letting the gravity of her words sink in before continuing, her voice softening. "But coercion shouldn't be our motivator. We should recognize the inherent value of such an endeavor."

Valentina's gaze was unwavering, moving deliberately across the room. She ensured that each guild representative felt the gravity of her declaration, their faces a tableau of emotions ranging from uncertainty to respect. "The Adventurer's Guild represents the inevitable march of time—adaptability in its rawest form. We stand on the brink of a new era since the Flash. Personal ambition, the future of this council, my role, or that of my successor—all of it pales in comparison to the safety of our Queendom. We owe it to our people to have heroes ready to face the looming threats."

A heavy silence blanketed the room. Only after what felt like an eternity did she speak again, authority radiating from her. "It's time. I cast my vote as aye, as Guildmistress of the Brightburn Merchant Guild."

A cacophony of voices erupted, echoing the sentiment of affirmation and dissent in near equal measure as only the Guildmasters were able to vote. When the count settled, the score was evident: Nine ayes to Six nays.

The Adventurer's Guild was no longer a dream, but a reality.

Turning toward Iris, Valentina rose gracefully from her chair, her movement signifying more than just a change in position. It was a transfer of power, an ushering in of a new era. "Grandmaster Iris Stuart of the Adventurer's Guild, would you please take this seat at the head of the Council of Guild for Brightburn?"

Deep breaths, Iris.

She felt the tide of emotions threatening to crash over her, the enormity of the moment pressing down. But she centered herself, drawing in mana and **[Focusing]** to maintain her composure.

Rising, she approached the chair. As she sat, a surge of **[Electromancy]** danced to her eyes, turning them into a mesmerizing spectacle of pulsating lightning magic.

Murmurs and gasps filled the room, all except for Sera, whose proud gaze met hers.

With her electric eyes shimmering, she offered a warm, confident smile as she surveyed the council chamber, her posture upright and her smile both warm and confident. “Regardless of how you cast your vote today, I’m deeply grateful. This dream, now a reality, allows for us to build toward a safer Lehelia, one where the good of the many is valued over individual ambitions.”

She paused, allowing her words to sink in. Her gaze then shifted, locking onto the future guildmistress of the Merchant Guild. There was a playful smirk, noticeable but she was devoid of malice. “I look forward to getting to know and working with each and every one of you. Together, we have the power to elevate both Brightburn and all of Lehelia. Rest assured, when challenges arise or quests beckon, the Adventurer’s Guild will be prepared. We will face them head-on for the betterment of all. So if you have a relic that needs finding, if you have a monster that needs slaying, or hell, if you have a cat stuck somewhere in a tree... the Adventurer’s Guild is open for business. Bring your problems, your quests—we’ll face them head-on, and we will prevail. Because that’s who we are.”

The room was heavy with a mix of awe, anticipation, and residual skepticism. *Let them doubt; they’ll soon see what this guild is capable of.* But just as quickly as the electric tension had charged the room, it seemed to dissipate, leaving only her final words hanging in the air.

“We’re adventurers and our tales will become legend.”