

The Demands of Progress

They gathered the group into Sloane's room within the inn. To maintain appearances, she had been staying in one of the nicer rooms in the inn since being in the city. Everyone was spread out in the sitting room, which was just slightly too small for nine people to sit comfortably. *Or maybe it's the fact that there are only four chairs.*

Occupying said chairs were Sloane, Gisele, Stefan, and Ernard. They had been discussing the evening and what could have gone better. *Spoiler alert, everything could have gone better.* She listened as Stefan explained what he had learned.

"Count Kayser has been collecting terrans for the purpose of learning how to utilize their magic. To date, he has sequestered nine of them. Apparently, Baron Bolton has been actively assisting the count in this endeavor. I found detailed documentation—"

"Was there anything about the ages? Any children?" Sloane asked.

Stefan shook his head. "No, there were only adults. He has been frustrated because none have shown the use of magic except two."

Ismeld tilted her head. "That makes sense. We only have three individuals capable of magic so far in our group. Perhaps it is rarer than we thought and not everyone has a core."

Stefan's expression turned grim. "That's just it. The count has secured the cores from eight of the individuals, even the ones without magic."

Maud gasped. Sloane glanced over at the other knights. Deryk stood with his back against the wall next to the door, while Maud, Ismeld, and Cristole sat on the floor next to him. Maud had her hand covering her mouth and her eyes were misty. Sloane squinted her eyes in thought. *He secured the cores? Wait... Oh shit. What the fuck?*

Sloane stared into Maud's eyes and saw sadness there. She knew exactly what the man had done.

"He killed them," Sloane stated simply.

Maud nodded. "It's the only way he could have retrieved them."

"I imagine the process to remove one would kill someone," Cristole added.

Sloane heard a small whimper on her right. She shifted to see Elodie where she had awkwardly sat off alone, sitting on her legs in the corner. "Why? Why would he do that? What could he hope to gain?" The elf questioned.

Stefan shrugged. "Power? Influence? It could be any number of things. This has consumed his entire purpose at this point. Everything he has done in the past month has to be to figure out magic and how to exploit it." He looked at Sloane. "He believes it is something your people brought with you, and that your people are innately magical."

Sloane scoffed. "That's preposterous. Our world has—had... no magic either. Maud and Gisele can use magic. Hell, Maud used magic before any of us."

"So, you didn't give them the ability to do so?" He pushed.

She shook her head. "No. I don't even know how anyone could give that ability."

Stefan's gaze was unfocused as he thought. Sloane continued, "Was there anything else? You mentioned he had killed eight people but had kidnapped nine. Does that mean someone is being held prisoner?"

"Yes. There's a woman. Other than you and Baron Bolton, she is the last one in the city. Apparently, several made it out of the city in time to avoid capture. Again, no children. I'm sorry." Sloane thought that he seemed to mean it.

"Will the Kingdom do anything?" Elodie asked.

"Possibly. We will need to up our timeline of meeting with the Academy here," Gisele said.

"I think I need to work on more tools for us to use as well," Sloane added.

Ismeld smirked. "Yes. If only so Gisele can use them. She is obsessed."

"They are a force modifier. Why wouldn't I want to utilize every tool at my disposal?" Gisele asked her fellow knight with a quirked eyebrow.

“Oh, I agree. I just think you should share with the rest of us,” Ismeld said with a chuckle.

“Sloane, what else can you make?” Ernard asked.

She considered the question. Sloane had several ideas, however, she likely would need to learn more magic before she could make an explosive grenade. For the time being, she needed to consider what options would benefit the knights and herself. There was one project she really needed to start.

“I would like to try to enhance your weapons and shields, perhaps your armor. However, there is another thing I want to work on first.” She turned again and looked at her financial advisor. “Are you still willing to assist with purchases for the House?”

The woman sat straighter. “Of course, my Lady. Allow me to be of service.”

“Perfect. After this, I have a list of supplies I would like for you to acquire tomorrow. I have a big project and I wish to get started and finish it before we leave the city.” She looked at Gisele. “Speaking of, we should likely move our timeline up.”

Gisele nodded. “I agree. I don’t believe we can stay longer. How long will this... project take to complete?”

Sloane tapped alongside her mouth as she considered. “No more than two weeks.”

The Knight-Captain looked down and to the side, then back up at Sloane. “That will work.”

Sloane slapped her hands onto her thighs. “Okay, if no one else has anything—”

“What of the attack?” Deryk posed.

Gisele shrugged. “There isn’t really anything we can do about it, my friend. The count has to send soldiers to handle it. We would not be able to join them.”

“What if they come here?” Elodie asked.

Cristole shook his head. “That is a long distance. I think we’re safe here.”

“I hope so.” The woman murmured.

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Sloane looked down at what she was working on. There were plates of metal, a pile of gems to the side, along with a blue core that had been found in some animal. Elodie had impressed her, completed every task she had asked of her, and procured every one of the supplies on the list. Elodie had given her a paper with the details of the order from the smith she had used, along with his contact information. *I will definitely utilize her for future transactions.* Sloane hoped to meet with the Guildmaster to discuss another business venture that she had thought of. One that would be highly beneficial to the Smith’s Guild.

She grabbed her journal and opened it to the page where she had started sketching and writing down ideas for the project. Ever since the knights had committed to moving on after escorting her to Swanbrook, she had been considering what she could do or make that would help her.

She needed ways to defend herself. Her grenades were the first step, and of course, her magic. Sword training with the knights helped, but she knew she would never be a master swordsman. *I’m not a punk though, I’ll use whatever tool I need to.* She certainly wasn’t one to stand back and hide behind others.

The next thing she would need was a way to be aware of her surroundings. Which brought her to this. She had considered several solutions, and none seemed to help when she was on the move. Stefan would be a huge help, but she still wasn’t sure how effective he’d be at the guard role. He was more a ‘sneak in the night and stab someone in the neck’ person. So, that brought her to what she was working on.

She was going to build a magitek bird, one that utilized runes, gems, and a core to function. Her original idea had called for something far smaller, but the core that Elodie had obtained was double the size Sloane had imagined. So instead of something small and cute like a sparrow, she was going to design something fierce and regal, like a falcon. *It fits the whole nobility theme too.*

Sloane sat down and started sketching out a design, quickly coming up with a form that would work. It would take a prodigious amount of alteration to fit everything, and she would need to include gems to help the bird move.

When it came to how to power the thing, the blue core was *exactly* what she needed, even if it was a bit bigger than she had imagined. It would allow it to draw in blue mana at a much higher rate and it would vastly increase the little guy's capability to perform autonomously.

The crown, legs, and feet would be made of steel, and she would also make the skeletal structure out of steel. However, she would look into using something else for the body or just painting the steel. *Mainly for the aesthetic. My birb boy has to look good.* The chest cavity would be where the core was held, while the cranium would hold most of the gems. She had already shaped and cut two onyxes to use for the eyes.

Her biggest hurdle was the steel for the body. The bird would need stainless steel. She was going to be outside, constantly. Having a material that would survive the elements better would be ideal. The only problem was stainless steel hadn't been invented until the twentieth century in her world. Luckily, she knew, roughly, how it was made and the materials it would need to have. Namely, chromium.

A few hours later, Sloane had selected the gems that she would use and had started fabricating the skeletal structure with steel. She looked over the work she had done. She had finished everything except for the wings, neck, and head. Those could come later. In the meantime, she put the little guy away and placed the gems she had selected for use into a small case that she would keep separate from her stash.

She looked down at her notebook and the paper from the smith next to it. Yeah, she needed to go meet with Guildmaster Romaris. His role as head of the Guilds in Thirdghyll would give her an in with the smiths and possibly help with what she planned. Plus, she had another small idea that she could use to entice him. Namely, the concept of subsidized research. With a smirk, she gathered up her things and walked out in search of Elodie.

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Sloane found Elodie sitting outside with Stefan at a table in the front of the inn. They were looking at a slew of documents and papers that were spread out in front of them. As she walked up, Stefan glanced up and nodded.

She smiled and sat down with the only two members of her House. “How is everything looking?”

Elodie must have been deep in concentration because she jerked in surprise when she saw Sloane right next to her. Stefan laughed. “We’re going over potential options to increase the prestige and influence of the House. Right now, you are more like a merchant house than a noble House. We will need to fix that if you wish to be taken seriously. You need to obtain land.”

Sloane shrugged. “Land is not on my mind currently. I will not be settling down anywhere until after we locate Gwyn. However, I know of one avenue we can utilize.” She looked at Elodie. “We’re going to ingratiate ourselves deeper with the Guilds.”

Guildmaster Romaris’ niece looked confused. “My Lady? How are we going to do that?”

Sloane pulled out her notebook and turned to the page with everything she knew about stainless steel. She rotated it slightly so they could see as she explained, “This is everything I know about something my people called stainless or *rustless* steel. It is vastly superior to carbon steel in many aspects. Primarily, the fact that it does not corrode and takes much longer to rust. Further, there is a simple concept in my world. We call it subsidized research.”

Elodie narrowed her eyes. “Do you mean like when a kingdom researches various subjects for some goal?”

Sloane considered. “Yes. For us, it definitely started with governments funding projects for specific goals. From what Ernard has told me, the Royal Academy of Avira works similarly to this. What I want to propose to him is setting up a deliberate function within the Guilds to fund and support research and development. Possibly even set up research centers that provide a single location to create new technology. This will allow the Guilds to stay at

the forefront of technological advancement. Especially since this world is at the cusp of a drastic societal shift with the introduction of magic.”

“You intend to intertwine your relationship even further with the Guilds?” Stefan asked.

Sloane nodded and explained, “Due to my unique circumstances, our House will not have a set place to work from. The Guilds are everywhere. I believe forming a lasting connection with them will benefit us more in the long term.”

Elodie looked between her and the raithe man. “Would you be willing to purchase land and establish a business, or perhaps even one of these research centers yourself somewhere? The House could grow in this way while we continue on the search.”

Sloane tapped her lips as she sat in thought. The idea had merit, and it would further her own influence in a way she hadn’t really considered. Her entire focus was currently on locating Gwyn. If she had more soft power, perhaps she could use it to lean on others during the search. Growing the House and forming a deeper connection with the Guild would provide this. The Guilds were everywhere she would go, it only made sense to utilize them as much as possible.

With the knights leaving, she would likely need more than just Stefan as a guard. No more than one or two, she suspected. Large groups attracted too much attention. Thirdghyll would be a terrible place to recruit more people, and she didn’t want to become a tool of the Guilds by continually accepting their people. She needed to find people on her own that would be loyal to her first.

She also would need craftsmen and researchers to work on these projects. *Wait, the alchemists that made the ink. I wonder if I could meet with them.*

With her mind made up, she answered, “Yes. That is something we can do. First, let’s meet with your uncle and the smithing guild. Perhaps, if we have time, we can go meet with the alchemists I learned about.”

“The ones who made the ink you had me pay for?” Elodie asked.

“Yes. I believe they would be a great addition to any research center we can make. However, we need to discuss a location for such a facility and how much it would cost us to see if we can afford it.”

Stefan groaned. “This seems like a subject that isn’t for me.”

Elodie smiled. “Don’t worry. You can go play with the knights. This is *exactly* why I am here.”

Sloane rotated her notebook back in front of her and grabbed her scribe, ready to take notes. It was time to force some progress.