

## Securing Advantages

Sloane cried out in pain as Gisele removed the arrow from her shoulder. Maud immediately poured her healing into it. Sloane whimpered as she felt her flesh stitch itself back together, and her shoulder seemed to almost writhe inside as everything reformed into place. With a final burst of green mana, the redhead nodded and then moved to heal Sloane's jaw. Sloane continued her pained whimper as her injury *itched* as if something was crawling around inside her skin. She tried not to cry out as she felt it, but her grip on Gisele's hand tightened and she reflexively jerked once she felt the *snap* of her jaw resetting itself with nothing but Maud's magic.

"Breathe. She's almost done. You're doing so good, Sloane," Gisele comforted her.

Sloane nodded as much as she could, letting the healing flow through her. The shooting pain eventually lessened as the healer fussed over her injuries. A soothing relief of magic passing through her entire body signaled the woman was finishing up.

When her jaw was finally able to move, she pushed to look around Maud, as the redhead got up and moved over to Cristole. "W-what the *fuck* was that?" she asked no one in particular, her jaw still a tad stiff.

"Empire's Fist," Deryk said as if it explained everything.

"I do not know what that is, but that isn't what I meant," Sloane ground out, wiping the tear streaks from her face.

Gisele was looking at Cristole with concern but a nod from the man had her taking a deep breath before turning to Sloane. The orkun shrugged and handed her a wet cloth. "I have no idea about the magic."

She sighed and wiped at her face, followed by the dried blood on her shoulder. "Her magic. It was based on illusions that she could somehow make *real*." She felt at her shoulder and placed the now red cloth into Gisele's outstretched hand. "That arrow was real."

Cristole nodded sympathetically from where he leaned against a wall, his face in a frown. His hand was hovering over his side while Maud stood next to him and poured more healing into his wounds, likely from lingering internal injuries that hadn't been healed by the telv's battlefield healing.

Gisele looked down at the arrow, then between Sloane and Cristole. "You two are lucky the woman's magic uses a bodkin arrowhead." She narrowed her eyes at Cristole. "Especially you. Ripping it out, mid-fight?"

The man grimaced. "I knew Maud had my back."

Maud pulled away, her magic dissipating, and punched him in the shoulder. "I was in the midst of fighting two people, healing your idiotic self almost got me turned into a pincushion by that woman. Never again pull an arrow out without me *right* there. You had no way of knowing if the head was barbed or not."

Deryk gave Maud an approving nod. “You fought well today, Maud. You kept your trophy?”

Maud nodded and gestured to the shield leaning against the wall next to the door. “Of course. They tried to hide it with some paint, but this is clearly a well-made shield used by Vlaredia. It will go well with my collection.”

Gisele was staring down at the arrow, her expression one of contemplation and concern. She looked up and around the group. “This is magic, right? Can she feel where this is, somehow?” she asked, nudging the offending object with her boot.

Sloane followed her friend’s gaze to the arrow and then reached down to pick it up. She channeled her mana into her eyes and used **Mana Sight**, making the object glow yellow in her vision. It was as if the entire object *was* mana. She returned the arrow to the floor and grabbed her sword. With a swing, she brought the blade down on the shaft of the arrow, the **[Spell-Piercing]** rune flared as the blade sliced through the fake wood, and the ‘real’ arrow dissolved into yellow mist.

“I think it would be safe to say, yes,” Sloane replied.

Gisele looked at Deryk, who nodded. She rapid-fired off orders to the group, “We need to relocate. Change inns. Tonight. We need to warn the guard.” She paused to take a deep breath. “Sloane, please work with your guards and Ernard. Your House needs its guard up, and they need to be prepared. If the Fist is in the city, they need to be constantly on alert.”

Sloane nodded. “I’ll talk with Nemura, now.”

She rubbed at her jaw, then glanced around one more time as everyone was bursting into motion, before walking out of the room herself.

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“You are not going anywhere without me, again. You realize this right?” Nemura said.

Sloane sighed. “Yeah, I figured you’d say that. It was rough, Nemura.”

**“Wrryatt!”**

“Yes, yes. You too, Tiberius.”

Her bird chirped but then went back to watching the door. It seemed even her little golem was on edge.

Nemura narrowed her eyes and leaned down in front of Sloane. “We are also going to work on your fighting and ability to react in a fight. You stand still too much. You are lucky to be alive.”

The guardswoman pulled out a cloth and dipped it into the glass of water that Sloane was drinking from. “Hey!”

Nemura reached over and grabbed Sloane’s chin, moving her head back and forth as the big telv examined her. “Maud missed a spot. Hold still.” Nemura gently moved her hair out of the way before she dabbed at her temple.

Sloane winced as the woman lightly applied pressure to her head.

“Don’t be a lamb. This isn’t bad.”

She scowled up at the woman, but then sighed when she saw the pink splotches on the cloth when Nemura moved her hand away.

“You do realize none of the guards Ernald has been working with will be able to fight the Empire’s Fist?”

Sloane shook her head. “No? I am not even sure what they are.”

Nemura nodded. “The Empire’s Fist is the organization of elite soldiers that the Vlaredia Empire fields. We—They are some of the best fighters in the region. If they *were* the Fist, we need to prepare. They will not give up so easily.”

Sloane tilted her head. She had not missed what the woman had said. “*We?*”

Nemura sighed. “I was once a member before I was discharged and left the Empire for the only place that was likely to accept me, Thirdghyll. I would ask you to keep this between us, if possible.” She hesitated, biting her lip, then looked Sloane in her eyes. “You have my allegiance, My Lady.”

Sloane’s eyes widened. “Is this going to be a problem? Fighting your former countrymen?”

Nemura’s eyes peered into hers. “The only problem will be if they attempt to harm you again. Because I *will* end them.”

“Nemura, if—”

The telv lifted her chin again and moved closer. “I left for a reason, but I am not ready to discuss it. You accepted me without question, and have given me nothing but respect. I will give you the same courtesy. Please continue that.”

“I understand,” Sloane said with a slow nod. Nemura returned it and pulled away to stand.

The woman looked like she had some conflicting thoughts, so Sloane decided to change the topic. “Did you speak with the General?”

“Yes. He said he would meet with you if needed, and did not give me any information on his messengers.”

Sloane sighed.

“Alright. Let’s go find Ernald and move everyone to a new inn.”

“You know, we *could* move everyone to the Center. It won’t be as comfortable, but we can set up the dormitory to use while we get everything else set up.”

Sloane considered it. It could work, and it would allow them to focus on having the Center up and running as soon as possible. She could see the benefit, even if it meant not staying in an inn and having the comforts. It would just cost money to get completely set up.

“Okay, I’ll talk to Elodie and Adaega, also.”

\* \* \*

It had been two and a half weeks since the attack by the Vlaredians and neither the knights nor the city guard had seen any sight of them. General Irileth had put his forces on high alert, but it seemed that the Empire's Fist had vanished into thin air.

Elodie had finalized the purchase of the Center and Ernard had finished selecting members of her new House guard coincidentally on the same day of the tavern attack. Meeting the guards later had gone well and it was a relief when she found out that the two senior guardsmen were both former officers in Marketbol's army. Ernard was certain that they would be able to work well together.

Sloane looked around as she walked up to the campus of the Reinhart Center. There were members of the staff working to move newly purchased furniture and equipment into the various buildings, but none of them stopped her as she walked past the visitor center which would be used to ensure only those approved would be let within the grounds—with an appropriate escort, of course—and approached the main entrance of the Center itself. She nodded at one of the guards who opened the door for her and stepped inside. The reception area was large with several desks set up where guests could be further directed to the appropriate location within the building. The receptionists would also handle appointments of those that worked there.

As soon as she entered, Sloane stopped and took a deep breath. Tiberius shifted from where he perched on her shoulder.

“Are you okay? You look exhausted.”

Sloane turned to see that Adaega was standing next to her. The woman looked concerned, but Sloane just smiled and gave her a nod.

“I am fine. It will take time for everyone to get used to the changes and the fact that everyone that has moved here is relying on me. It is a lot more stressful than I expected, but it will be worth it.”

“It has definitely been busy. We have it well in hand though, Sloane. The esquire, Nadia, is working on a contract to recruit a scribe. I'll have more on that for you if we get him.”

“Nadia? Have I met her yet?” Sloane had been meeting so many people over the last two weeks that she was struggling to remember names.

“Yes, Stefan's sister.”

“Oh! Yes, I remember now. The big sister who treats our scary, roguish Blade like she has to take care of him.”

Adaega laughed. “That's the one. She is a lovely woman. I do need to get you in with her for another meeting, but we've been busy and you've been busy. We keep all missing each other.”

“I know. I am sorry. With everything that has happened, I have been working on my artificing nearly non-stop.”

“We understand. Remember, you have a team now. If you need something from us, that is literally why we are here. For now...” Adaega gestured to one of the offices with her thumb. “...are you ready for the meeting?”

Sloane nodded again and allowed Adaega to lead her inside. She waved to the guardsman who stood outside and motioned for him to follow.

Inside, Sloane saw that the room was sparsely furnished. Only a few tables and chairs were set up together to create a larger space for everyone to sit around. Next to the fireplace in the room, Nemura was in the middle of a conversation with General Irileth, another elf she didn't know, and Gisele. Ernard and one of his senior guardsmen, a telv, stood with two other telv that she didn't recognize. None of the other knights were present as Sloane knew they were working to ensure the Vlaredians did not catch them off guard.

The guard who followed her into the room posted himself inside and next to the doorway. Sloane looked around and held in a sigh. With a nod to Adaega, the woman stepped forward. "General Irileth, commanders of the Marketbol Army, I apologize for the lack of amenities, but please, have a seat so we can discuss the purpose of your visit."

The general turned and nodded to his men. Everyone found a chair and sat, with the General taking the center seat across from where a small nameplate indicated for Sloane to sit.

Sloane smiled. "General, now that we are all here, what can House Reinhart do for you?"

The grey-haired telv was in his armor, and she had to wonder if he wore anything else. It certainly did not look comfortable. "Lady Sloane, I notice that your eyes are not filled with magical mist any longer."

She shrugged. "I needed to make sure I wasn't dismissed. I do not regret it."

He smirked. "I do not believe you should. It certainly worked," he said ruefully, but then he leaned back in his chair and sighed. "I would appreciate it if what we discussed did not leave this room."

Sloane looked around at her people, knowing they wouldn't spread anything, but attempting to alleviate the man's concerns nonetheless. "It will not. What is it, General?"

His face grew serious. "Mogagale is calling its bannermen to arms... *now*. That is a slow process. As such, they will not be here in time."

Sloane froze. She knew what that meant, but she had to ask. "Here in time for what?"

"Scouts report that the empire's army will soon be on the move. The council *requests* you to make good on your word, for we will have to hold out until our reinforcements can arrive."

The room was silent. Sloane glanced around and saw everyone was tense. She caught Gisele's eye, the woman giving her a slow nod.

She turned back to the general. Trying to think of everything that she could do to help. It was probably easier to simply ask. General Irileth sat there, scrutinizing her patiently; giving her time to reply. His subordinates were also stonefaced as they too awaited her answer.

Sloane took a deep breath and leaned forward. "How can we help, general?"

He nodded, and the other men instantly pulled out scrolls, notebooks, and a map.

*It's time to work.*

\* \* \*

Another four weeks had gone by since they had started preparing for the Vlaredian Empire's army. Scouts reported that the army would arrive within the week, as the army had actually been attacked when it tried to go around the Agenval Forest. *Those Valeni give no shits.*

While the attack itself did not do much in the way of damage, it was apparently enough to delay the army an entire week as the army had to move further west and trudge through the hills. Which caused more delays, due to a storm that had passed through and filled their route with mud. She knew the general was ecstatic each time he was told about another hindrance to the Vlaredians.

That excitement was dulled by the notification that the other Sovereign army had also been delayed due to weather. In fact, just the *marshaling* of the force had been delayed. The city it seemed had wholly dismissed the war with the empire and had been caught so off guard that the only standing forces they had *were* their city guard. Delay after delay was holding them up and Sloane was worried about how any force mustered would fare against the professional formation the empire fielded.

Despite the approaching army, the general and his men did not seem as concerned as she felt they should have. The city would be coming under siege, and while the remaining forces of the city were constantly preparing, she felt they did not take the threat seriously. *It's starting to affect me as well. I keep catching myself almost becoming complacent.*

The fact that no one had seen or heard from Ressa and her soldiers was the only thing keeping her on edge. Nemura was a constant presence, and she had warned Sloane numerous times to not let her guard down. The former Fist was certain that Ressa was simply laying low and waiting for her people's army to arrive. She looked up, catching sight of Tiberius as her falcon flew overhead, keeping sight around her.

The four guards at the front gate saluted her and Nemura as they approached, quickly opening the gate to allow them into the campus.

Sloane stepped into the courtyard of the campus and observed the work that was being done for the Center. Staff that Elodie and Adaega had hired were moving all around performing their various tasks. Meanwhile, guards from both her House and the city were patrolling the grounds, several catching sight of her and nodding as they continued along. Listening, she could hear the hammering from the forge at the rear of the campus from here. It was a sign that Koren and his two new apprentices were hard at work preparing weapons and armor for enchanting.

"Sloane, behind you," Nemura said from her right. Sloane turned and saw more people and supplies approaching the gate.

She moved to let a wagon filled with crates of silden ferns roll by and to the right, heading to the alchemy hall where Rel and Kemmy were making large quantities of enchanting ink.

It was that reason that she was here, she needed to enchant some equipment for the city. Sloane stretched and yawned. When she opened her eyes, her Director of Reinhart Center was approaching.

"Every time I see you, you look exhausted," Adaega said.

Nemura coughed. "She has been working nonstop. I have had to force her to go to sleep. You wouldn't believe how long it took me to convince her that staying here wasn't proper for a baroness."

The woman smirked. "I believe that is my fault. Admittedly, I am not used to working with the nobility."

Sloane sighed. "If it makes you feel better, I am still not used to how nobility is done here."

Adaega nodded sagely. "Shall we?"

Sloane gestured toward the main entrance of the Center. "After you, director."

She followed Adaega into the facility, amazed at the progress that had happened in just one day. The place was now a well-oiled machine of activity and efficiency, with everyone working together to provide support to the city's defenders. She couldn't help but feel proud of the House she'd come to create, even if it was still new. Elodie and Adaega were amazing at their jobs, and she wished there was time to do more to help them. As it stood, Sloane wasn't sure what would happen when the Vlaredians attacked, let alone make it to Swanbrook before winter hit fully. They were running out of time.

"Sloane."

"Hmm? Oh, sorry."

Adaega shook her head, but Sloane's ability to get lost in her thoughts was well-known by those closest to her at this point. "In here."

They entered the same office where she had met the general and his commanders. Except for this time, the tables were rearranged and there were now chairs in front of the fireplace. Bookshelves also lined the walls and were filled with books. Sloane wished she had time to peruse at her leisure.

A young telv was sitting behind one of the tables. He looked to be no older than seventeen or eighteen and had dark brown hair. His face was clean-shaven and his eyes were a vibrant hazel.

The boy stood up at their entrance.

Adaega greeted the young man. "Hello, Orthan. This is Lady Sloane Reinhart.

Orthan nodded but didn't say anything.

Sloane glanced at Adaega who sighed, her arms crossed over her chest.

Adaega tried again. "Good afternoon, Orthan. Would you like to introduce yourself?"

Orthan made a face and stepped forward. He bowed from the waist before straightening and speaking.

"My name is Orthan Barat. I am the second son of Lord Amil Barat and the youngest person on this continent to be considered a master scribe. My father is a former member of the Ruling Council and my brother is currently in training to become a paladin. When he finishes, I will be the next in line for House Barat."

Sloane frowned. There was something off about the boy's speech. His voice sounded strained and unnatural. It was as if he was uncomfortable speaking and was simply reading from

a script, which seemed odd for a noble since it was likely he had grown up around others for most of his life. Sloane waited for him to continue.

"My father has been searching for a way for me to gain experience and assistance with my... abilities."

Sloane looked to Adaega for an explanation, and the woman shrugged. "Orthan also has an attunement to blue mana and an artifice affinity. With a little work, I think he will be able to take over the assistant rune scribe position."

She squinted her eyes. "Assistant rune scribe?"

Adaega stepped forward and lifted onto her toes to whisper into her ear. Sloane tilted her head to make it easier for the shorter woman. "His father's House is in decline. They wish to tie their fortunes to your House by some process that makes them subordinate to yours. The boy will work for us until it is time for him to take over his House."

Sloane raised a brow. "There's a lot in that, Adaega."

The woman sighed. "Trust me, I know. It will have to do for now. We will keep searching for someone else."

She turned to look at Orthan. "I look forward to seeing what you can do."

The boy nodded and returned to his seat, pulling out a book and opening it once settled.

Adaega sighed. "It will be some work, but trust me... he's a genius."

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After she met with the boy, Sloane and Nemura followed Adaega to the Center's auditorium. It was the second largest building on the campus and hosted several small classrooms that were being converted into research rooms. The main focus of the building, however, was its massive auditorium and hall that could easily be converted into an area to host a gala or other events. A consideration that had Adaega quite excited.

As they entered, they saw a hive of activity. Numerous soldiers and smiths from the Smithing Guild were in the room preparing everything and bringing even more supplies. The chairs that made up the sloped floor had been moved in favor of workbenches and quilts. On those lay spears, bows, shields, and all sorts of weaponry needed to defend the city. Jewelers had even been acquired to etch the runes that she would need to power, as there were simply far too many for her to do herself.

The city had sent countless hunters and soldiers to scour the countryside for any animals worth killing. The meat it brought would be beneficial during the siege, but the cores they brought back would be paramount in the work she was attempting to accomplish.

She looked toward the center of the hall and saw a table that had been made just for this purpose. The table was made of steel and had numerous engravings and runes of its own. On each corner blue cores had been inlaid into it so that she could draw mana from them after placing her hands on two points she had designed. The table itself was the brainchild of Koren



and a team of scholars from the city. Sloane had taken their idea and made it a reality with the House smith's assistance.

She settled into the chair and sat down. Glancing around, at all of the work, she took a deep breath. One of the officers of the city's army stepped forward.

"Lady Reinhart. We have had a chance to test the various combinations of runes you suggested. I would like to share feedback," the high-elven woman said.

"Please, what have your people found?"

The woman took out a notebook, opened it up, and read from it. "Based on tests, we believe that the ballista bolts *should* utilize the **[Arcane Explosion]** runework. While we agree with your initial assessment of its efficacy, the magic's burst would be strong enough combined with the force of the bolt to critically damage the walls of a siege tower. This, along with the **[Lighten]** rune would allow our ballistae to outrange anything the Vlaredians can field. We would also like the **[Strengthen]** rune on the ballistae themselves."

Sloane raised a hand. "One note, **[Lighten]** alone will not do what you want. You will need two additional runic chains at least. We want to **[Strengthen]** the bolts, the more force you can put on the bolt, the more kinetic energy you can transfer. We're going to cheat standard physics a bit as well, and use mana to affect our propulsion with a **[Speed]** rune with a trigger that detects when it is fired. Something like, **[Detect: Momentum]--[Increase: Speed]**. Now the last one is important because a light bolt will struggle with penetration. Therefore, we want to use **[Detect: Impact]--[Amplify: Mass]** on the bolt head, which will then negate the lightening rune and increase the density of the bolthead. That along with the **[Spell: (Arcane Explosion)]** which we'll also combine with a detection rune, will ensure that you are causing the most damage possible.

"Oh, actually, the ballistae are made of wood, this will likely affect the ability of the enchant. Also, this is *a lot* of mana draw within the bolt, and will not work well with arrows, at least not yet until we redesign bows."

The woman seemed as if she struggled to follow, but she nodded once she appeared to catch up. "Your explanation of the... *physics* behind the enchants is something we do not have adequate knowledge of. However, we agree that enchanting the wood may prove difficult along with using the enchants you described, which is why we have had our woodworkers place a green mana core into each of the siege weapons. We believe a..." the woman's eyes scanned her notes. "...a runic chain of **[Renew: Wood]** would be beneficial in case the ballistae are damaged."

"Oh! That is a good idea." She glanced at Nemura. "Can you please get me some wood?"

Nemura raised a brow. "Would you like a rod, and how big do you like it?"

"It doesn't matter, the bigger the better, so I can practice this work."

Nemura chuckled as she shook her head and walked away.

Sloane glanced up at the officer, the woman was very deliberately staring into her notebook and not looking up.

*Oh! That bitch!*

Nemura returned with her request, carrying a fifteen kilo ballista bolt as if it was but a small stick. The high elf raised a brow as Nemura dropped the two-meter-long bolt onto the table. Sloane gave the woman a look, but then just shook her head, ignoring the smirk of the woman.

The soldiers had the right idea, but their simple runic chain wasn't the one that would work. It had no way of detecting damage, but **[Renew]** instead of **[Repair]** or **[Alter]** was an inspired choice.

Sloane grabbed her inscribing pen and went to work, doing a modified working that should repair damage to the wood itself. Channeling her blue mana, she pushed and inscribed the runic chain for **[Detect: (Durability: <DAMAGED>)] – [Draw: (Power) - (Mana: Green)] -- [Renew: (Element: Wood)] - [Amplify].**

She quickly stood up, running over and grabbing one of the green cores that were in a crate to the side. She came back and looked over the bolt. Tilting her head, she considered how she would add it. *Well... this is a test.* She grabbed the metal head and pushed her mana into it, focusing on *Altering* it. The bolt's point collapsed inward and then she rounded it and placed the orb onto it. With some more Alteration, she solidified the orb onto the head. *Now that's a staff worthy of a half-giant druid.* She thought with a smirk. Sloane quickly reworked her conduits to ensure it all connected and looked at the telv who stood observing her work.

"Hmm... Nemura, we need to break this now."

The telv nodded and moved the *staff* to the ground. She pulled out her sword and Sloane watched her use her own mana-infused ability. After a beat, the sword glowed faintly red and the woman brought it down onto the staff, a resounding crack causing the entire area to go quiet.

Sloane stared down at the bolt that had neatly cracked in half. She watched and waited, the green core pulsed in light and then a surge of that light rushed down the conduits and then spread out through the wood. Within five seconds of being cracked, she watched as the wood neatly stitched itself back together.

"Perfect. I will use this runic chain on the ballistae and I believe there are a few other enchants I can accomplish to improve the power and ability of the siege weapon itself. After all, it is much more important than its individual bolts in transferring energy," Sloane explained to the soldier.

The soldier who had been observing, stood wide-eyed before she furiously scribbled down some notes.

Sloane smirked, looking down at the meter-long bolt. "Okay Nemura, the rod's all yours. Feel free to test it in private."

She winked at the woman.

Sloane's eyes went wide as she lurched forward at the sudden slap on her back; Nemura's booming laughter filled the hall.

With a shake of her head, she joined in, laughing and letting the tension that had been building up release ever so slightly.

*Not much longer until we're in yet another fight for survival. Have to take the positive moments as they come.*