
Let's Get to Work

Sloane sat in her suite, the room transformed into a makeshift meeting space. The inn's staff had just delivered tea and an assortment of finger foods, setting them on a low table in the center of the room. She was dressed in her finest robes, rich and luxurious fabric, making her feel every inch the mage she aspired to be.

Even if she now knew she wasn't one fully yet. For now, after her meeting with Aila yesterday, she felt like a fraud. A con artist, someone who could intuitively use mana only to create and cast system-imprinted spells, not weave her own magic from nothing. She needed a crutch.

Not to mention her build was all over the damn place.

She was determined to try and rectify that after this meeting.

Mariel sat nearby, a chair positioned to take notes with an attentive and focused expression.

To Sloane's left sat the esquire Stefan had introduced her to earlier. He was an older sun elf who had the air of a seasoned professional. His grey hair was neatly trimmed, as was his beard, and he exuded an air of quiet competence. They had spent the better part of a bell discussing Sloane's plans for her business in Nornport, and she felt confident that he would represent her interests well in the city.

As she waited for the meeting to begin, Sloane's thoughts drifted to her parents. She hadn't had much time to think of them lately, with everything that had been going on. She hoped they were alright and knew they must be heavily relying on her sister right now.

Papa, mamma... Mia sorellina... Mi mancate, ragazzi.

She hadn't spoken Italian in a long time, which saddened her. She had been so proud to learn her parents' native tongue when she moved to Italy with Gwyn.

That kid picked it up like a sponge, though. I wonder if she speaks it here.

Probably only when she's mad, she mused, a faint smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the quiet scratching of the esquire's quill as he silently reviewed and marked his notes from their meeting. She appreciated how quickly he was aligning himself with her House's needs.

He also had a... decent amount of suggestions for how she should proceed.

She suppressed a sigh, forcing herself to maintain a noble bearing.

Which she had to admit that she wasn't prepared for.

The esquire had been surprised when she mentioned that her House had no majordomo, knights, or anyone else other than those in Marketbol and the three with her now. She explained how Stefan filled the role of a majordomo, just the commoner version.

She didn't think the esquire liked that response, but he wisely didn't comment.

He had suggested finding a knight who would maintain her House within the city after she left. He had also mentioned that her decision not to buy a residence was the correct choice, especially if House Estos had offered one through Ilian. That way she could focus all of her efforts on the center and finding the right people, followed by transforming the gift into a headquarters, or even the center itself.

She had to admit she liked the idea. It was shrewd and practical.

Further, the man had mentioned that he might know of a few knights-errant who would potentially be willing to pledge themselves, but Sloane reserved her judgment. She wasn't sure how she felt about that. The idea of having a knight serve her House was appealing, but she also knew it came with responsibilities. She would have to think it over.

It was a difficult task to find individuals she could rely on in each city, especially when she had to leave them behind to manage her affairs. In Marketbol, Ernard was that person. She trusted him implicitly, just as she did Adaega and Elodie. But Ernard held a special place in her trust, only shared by the knights, Nemura, and Stefan.

She wished Nemura would accept her offer to become a knight, but she knew it was something the woman was firmly against. That was part of the reason she was hesitant about having a knight in Nornport. It wouldn't look right if she had to explain that Nemura held more authority and influence than whoever that person was.

Stefan had also been against the idea of knighthood, which had surprised her. But she understood his reluctance when he explained that it would mean giving up his position in his guild.

Her two closest retainers were now fulfilling their new roles with quiet efficiency. Nemura stood by the door in clothing in the house's colors of a greyish blue and silver while Tiberius perched on her shoulder. She would pick up her armor within the next few days, and what was probably not too surprising was that Sloane was more excited to enchant the armor than Nemura was to receive it.

In his role as House Reinhart's new chief of staff, Stefan stood nearby, dressed in an elegant tunic and pants, ready to offer advice if needed. He was also her spymaster, which was the duty he much preferred.

The table in the room was set for six, and Sloane sat in the middle chair on one side, flanked by Aila on her right and the esquire on her left. Aila looked down at Vesper, who looked bored on the floor next to her.

She wasn't sure how that was possible in something made of steel.

A knock on the door interrupted Sloane's thoughts. Nemura opened it, revealing Lord Ilian Estos, the sun elf nobleman who was interested in a partnership with Sloane. Sloane stood to greet him, her movements graceful and confident.

"Welcome, Ilian," she said, extending her hand.

Ilian took it with a smile, his eyes bright with excitement. Sloane led him to the table, introducing him to those present. They decided to forgo formal titles, opting to use first names instead. In the private meeting earlier, Stefan and the esquire had agreed that this would be appropriate given their familiarity.

"Thank you for reaching out so quickly, Sloane," Ilian said, his voice warm. "I'm eager to get started."

Sloane nodded, her eyes meeting his. "As am I. Please, have a seat."

Ilian took the chair across from her, and Sloane returned to her seat between the esquire and Aila. The atmosphere in the room was charged with anticipation, a sense of something momentous about to unfold.

But then the feeling went away as quickly as it arrived. She'd done this before. And this time the person had come to *her*.

She had to admit the feeling was a bit intoxicating.

Before they began, Stefan moved and poured some tea before passing the cups to those at the table.

Sloane took a small sip before setting it down and observing Ilian. The man was calm, but the dark skin of his face and hastily powdered bags under his eyes betrayed just how tired and stressed he was. His beard was still well-kempt, but it wasn't the picture-perfect shave that he'd had when she first met him.

She leaned forward, her eyes fixed on Ilian. "I have decided to accept the offer you made in Swanbrook."

He smiled. "I can't say that I hadn't hoped you'd come around once we made it away from all of the nastiness that was around Swanbrook. I'm delighted you'd like to join to House Estos in such a manner."

Her eyes narrowed on their own accord. She raised a hand. “That was not the deal and you know it. Let me lay out *my* proposal.”

She gave him a moment to digest what she was saying then continued, “I want to establish a *partnership* with House Estos for the next Reinhart Center here in Nornport. Aila will be the director, and I want to utilize your House for both distribution of the products we create, and for obtaining the raw materials we require, such as gems, metals, crystals, and other magical resources that may be discovered. I also want your support in ensuring that my house is given proper status within the city. I will accept your offer to provide my House with an estate, but let me be clear: House Reinhart will not be beholden to anyone else.”

Ilian nodded thoughtfully. “I can see the potential benefits of such a partnership. However, I must admit, not tying your House to ours will make it a more difficult bargain. I had hoped for a more... binding relationship between our houses. If the offer of having your House joined to ours in such a way does not appeal to you, what about an alliance of a more... personal connection?”

“I have no interest in a relationship, Ilian. I will not be staying in Nornport, but I do want those in my house here to maintain their status. I plan to expand House Reinhart further before leaving in the summer.”

Ilian’s eyes flicked to the esquire, who sat silently and seemed to search the older man’s face for something. “Very well,” Ilian said slowly. “But I... and by that I mean House Estos, needs more guarantees. I want to use this potential business to improve my standing within my house. The Runecard business would provide that.”

Sloane leaned back in her chair, her fingers tapping on the table. “My business in Marketbol is primed for massive expansion. Currently, due to the war, the only markets for my products there are the Sovereign Cities in the central plains. I offer House Estos the exclusive right to distribute Reinhart products within Rosale for a period of five years. After that, we can negotiate a continuation, subject to your ability to meet performance milestones and distribution expectations. I will permit forming a second company with the express purpose of fabricating Runecards, but it will be a joint venture. We will have an equal stake after the investment from the Banking Guild.”

The sun elf nobleman’s eyes narrowed. “That’s a tempting offer. However, we would be providing most of the labor and material, I believe. Why would you get an equal stake?”

“Because the knowledge is mine. The process and everything regarding it is mine. The exclusivity with the Banking Guild is mine. You cannot even create an alternative to compete with me. There *is* no business without me.”

He drummed his fingers on the table before nodding. “What else do you have in mind?”

“Isn’t that all you wanted?” she asked, her mind turning back to that moment in Guildmaster Cross’s office. “I recall the business you wanted was for another center to be established, and the Banking Guild was to handle investments while you gained the rights to fabricate Runecards. You did offer an estate and assistance in getting to the capital, but I don’t recall any offer beyond that.”

“You did state that any agreements regarding Rosale should be negotiated when in Rosale.”

She acceded to the point. “Fair. I did. And here we are.”

“Here we are. I admit that it may have been my fault, but I was always working under the assumption that it was understood that the lesser House would join the higher one when conducting business of this nature. It... is how things are done. I had not considered that it would not be the same for a terran.”

She was starting to realize just how ambitious the man was, and how much he *needed* her to fulfill that ambition.

Sloane smiled. “You are correct. We are fiercely protective of our individual sovereignty. I admit that Rosale provides unique opportunities at this time for my business interests. Nornport is also ideally situated away from any competition in the near future. That said, I do not *need* Nornport or even Rosale. I can quite literally just pass through.”

He opened his mouth to speak but she cut him off. “*However*, in the interest of thanking you for your assistance in getting out of Swanbrook, I am willing to work with you. But do not mistake my kindness for a willingness to give up what is *mine*.”

“Understood,” he ground out slowly. “I hope you understand *my* position. Any deal we make *must* have benefits to my House or it is pointless for me. I *only* know of your Runecard business and that is just from what Toren has told me. I have not seen it in practice. I *have* seen your golems, however...”

Sloane nodded, understanding his predicament. “I also plan to introduce a product that will serve a similar function as the Church’s Ceremony of Paths.”

Ilian’s eyebrows shot up. “That’s a bold move. From what my uncle has told me, it is already established within Calling, and the Church will be moving to Dayton next, quickly followed by here. How do you think it will be received if you create something that directly competes with the will of the gods?”

“The will of the gods?” she asked with an arched brow. “I have a positive relationship with the Church, however, I will disagree with that. That said, we’ll market exclusively to nobles and those taking on jobs that involve hunting monsters, like what my people would call ‘adventurers’. We’ll set a high profit margin initially, which further limits the market. While this is not ideal, it will also increase

the desirability of the product and provide the center here with funding. By limiting access, the masses will still rely on the Church, which should appease them.”

Ilian nodded slowly, his mind working through the implications. “That could work. Being the two houses that bring such a product to Rosale would certainly improve our standing.”

Aila chimed in. “Also, if this venture brings enough funding, I can bring back the workers I had before. We just couldn’t afford to keep them on.”

Sloane thought that was a good idea. “Don’t worry about funding. We just need to create products and market them.”

Ilian looked up, offering to provide some people for the Center, but Sloane declined.

“My House will handle the Center,” she said firmly. “House Estos can focus on distribution. It is what you’re known for, is it not?”

She didn’t want to give him too much influence within her company, especially since she would soon be leaving and wouldn’t be able to curb any overreaches.

“It is,” Ilian admitted, his eyes narrowing slightly. “While our merchant fleet within Rosale isn’t as robust as House Sae’ta’s, it’s by no means lacking. Our land routes cover the entire region and extend throughout the central plains.” He took a moment to elaborate on his House’s business, explaining how it was ideally suited for what Sloane desired. He mentioned that there were fewer than ten viscounts within the nation, and only three counts or countesses, emphasizing the importance of their influence and standing.

They discussed Sloane’s current business and the assets she could bring to the table, such as the alchemy business in Marketbol and the enchanted items business with the dwarf siblings in Vilstaf. She could even negotiate a deal with Reanny to bring their items into Rosale through Port Estos.

As the conversation continued, Sloane’s mind suddenly clicked into place. She knew exactly who to approach for help with marketing and generating revenue. But then her mind snapped back to something Ilian had said about House Estos’s ability for sea distribution.

She tilted her head, her eyes narrowing slightly. “What did you mean by ‘within Rosale?’”

“I’m sorry?” Ilian looked momentarily confused.

“Earlier, you said your merchant fleet *within* Rosale. Do you have assets outside of Rosale that may be pertinent to this partnership? I have been quite open in detailing the breadth of my business. I would appreciate it if you are open with me as well.”

Ilian visibly winced.

“He meant that House Estos has a merchant fleet operating from elsewhere. This is something he was likely not supposed to mention as that would upset the relationship with House Sae’ta

significantly,” the esquire interjected quietly, his voice calm and measured. “I would suggest we overlook his misspoken words and keep it with the confidence he is due because of your familiarity.”

That got the attention of the nobleman, and Ilian's eyes narrowed as he regarded the esquire. “I thought you looked familiar. Did House Sae'ta put you up to this?”

Sloane turned and looked at the older man who smiled sadly. “I no longer represent House Sae'ta. They found younger, more malleable individuals in my profession to handle their business. No, I represent House Reinhart, and as their esquire, it is my duty to not divulge house secrets. To do otherwise would have me stripped of my license. I take my duty *very* seriously, and only have Lady Reinhart's best interests in mind.”

Sloane found herself smiling, her eyes meeting the esquire's. It appeared she had found someone worthwhile. She turned back to Ilian, her expression turning serious. “Will this secret fleet be available for anything we're doing?”

The man let out a sigh and looked around. “This *will* be kept between us, yes? Not even my family should know that you are aware.”

She waved him off. “Fret not. I won't betray you. I'm the one others should fear betraying.”

He glanced at the end of the table where two metal appendages could be seen swaying. “Noted.” He took a deep breath and nodded. “Yes, they would be used for further trade. They are based out of the city of Trézioux on the island of Astrarest. So, their routes take them primarily to Lehelia, Meris, and Blightwych.”

“Not Avira?” she asked. All of those names were familiar to her, especially Blightwych, but they were also in close proximity to the small coast of the big nation.

“No, there are some issues with that. I don't know what they are, but as a candidate, I was simply made aware of the fleet. Nothing further unless I am chosen as my uncle's successor.”

She nodded. “Very well. I think that's all I need for my own curiosity. Now, let's finish our negotiations. Here are some other requirements that I wish to go over...”

The esquire smiled and started going through the list they had made. As he spoke, Ilian's former confidence started to waver.

The poor man was coming at this from the perspective of two noble houses joining and working together like a bunch of friends.

Ah, she loved the precious naive nature of it all.

No, this would be all business. And in business, things like... feelings did not matter. Your bloodline was second to profits.

This world thought their noble squabbling was cutthroat. She almost laughed. No, it was nothing compared to what happened between multinational conglomerates.

And that's what she was slowly building.

Her plans were starting to fall into place. They just needed a bit more coaxing. Rosale may be the safest place she'd been to so far, but it was still far from what she needed. Gwyn needed somewhere safe after she found her. Sloane just hoped she was safe for now.

With every step further away from Westaren, she knew the likelihood of finding her was lower, but she had a hunch. She needed to search in Rosale. Starting with this city. Then she would use the connections she would gain here to help her in the capital.

First, she just needed to get through this meeting.

Sloane put the thoughts aside just as the esquire finished. She thanked the man and took over, "We can, of course, negotiate. I have a few other things I would like to ask."

He nodded a bit too quickly. "Yes, of course."

"First, allow me to ask something unrelated." He nodded, and she posed her question, "Are there any terrans in the city?"

Clearly, that wasn't what he expected but Ilian tilted his head, considering. "Yes, there're a few. The most well-known is the doctor that works with the countess for the city."

"Can you get me a meeting with him?"



Mariel and Sloane followed closely behind Nemura and Stefan as they entered a training ground that the telv woman had secured for their use. They were all clad in their combat armor, including Mariel, who wore the necromancy necklace from Sloane, the chainmail hauberk gifted by Nemura, and the dagger from Stefan.

Sloane's outfit was a mix of practicality and enchantment. She wore her enchanted breastplate, the only piece of armor she had on, which was designed to provide maximum protection with minimal encumbrance. At her side hung her rune-enchanted short sword, its blade gleaming with a subtle magical aura. A belt around her waist held several grenades, each one a potential lifesaver in a tight spot. Her caster was holstered along her leg, ready to be drawn at a moment's notice.

As they reached the center of the dirt yard, Nemura turned to face the group, a smile playing on her lips. "So, how would you like to go about this?" she asked, her eyes focused on Sloane.

Sloane pursed her lips, considering. “I’ve put a lot of thought into this. We should be focusing on our builds, not just aimlessly trying to improve our skill with a sword or whatever,” she explained. “Even you and Stefan need to focus on creating more abilities or becoming more comfortable with the ones you have. Abilities and spells are everything with this system. For you, Mariel, we need to see exactly how you use magic and practice with that. For me, I want to see what I can do to fix the lack of versatility in my spells. I want to offload most of my stuff to my golems and equipment, so that what I do have can be more about augmenting their capabilities and improving my own mobility. I have a severe lacking there.”

Nemura’s smile widened, and she glanced at Stefan. “You heard her. Let’s go work on our abilities. I learned a new one called **[Debilitating Strike]** that I want to practice.”

Stefan gulped, his eyes darting between Nemura and Sloane.

Before they left, Sloane spoke up, her voice serious. “I’m serious, guys, about one thing I mentioned. With the contract we signed with Ilian, I’m going to be busy for the next couple of seasons. I want you two to be working on your abilities and steps throughout that entire time. Don’t worry about me. I need you both to prioritize gaining steps. Alright?”

Stefan and Nemura shared a look. “We understand,” Nemura said. “We’ll get it done. Can’t have you showing us up in that regard.”

“I still remember where you both were at. Stefan, you have a lot of catching up to do. I hope to have prototypes for the excerpt reader ready by the end of winter. We’ll evaluate your progress then.”

They both nodded. “We’ll get on it. Don’t worry,” Stefan assured her.

“There are monsters right where we will be traveling through.”

“Sloane, we understand. We will catch up.” Nemura assured her.

As they turned and walked toward some training dummies, Sloane turned to the falcon perched on Mariel’s shoulder. “Tiberius, go work with Nemura. I want you to act as her partner and watch her back when she leaves the city. Train with her.”

The bird tilted its head, regarding her for a moment. Then it chirped in acknowledgment before taking off and flying toward the tall telv.

Sloane turned to the young raithe girl, her eyes softening. “Alright, you ready?”

Mariel looked nervous, her eyes darting around the training ground. “N-No. Are you sure?”

“You’ve seen your excerpt, yes?” Sloane asked gently, her voice a soothing contrast to the clashing of weapons in the background from Stefan and Nemura.

Mariel nodded, her eyes still wide with apprehension.

Sloane turned and glared at the noise her retainers were making, and saw just as Stefan used some sort of movement ability that made him blur under Nemura's strike and punch her in the side.

Nemura just laughed.

Well, I guess he has been working at it. That's new.

"I want you to explain it to me," Sloane said, her eyes never leaving Mariel's.

Mariel nodded again and quickly reached into her satchel, pulling out a locked notebook. Sloane's brows raised in surprise. "You don't have to—"

The girl shook her head, her eyes determined. "I trust you. Plus, it's in here."

She opened the book with a small key and flipped to a page, her fingers trembling slightly. "Alright, I have twenty steps. I have a remarkable core with black and yellow mana. Uhm, abjuration—I learned about that one first—and conjuration—that's the scary one."

"What spells and traits do you have? I assume you are magically aligned?"

The girl nodded. "Yes, I have three traits. **[Mana Sense]**, **[Sense Unlife]**, and **[Necromancy]**."

Sloane winced.

There it is.

"Spells?"

"Only two. **[Mend Bone]** and **[Animate Skeleton]**."

"**[Animate Skeleton]**? Hmmm. No passives? Just actives?"

Mariel's head bobbed up and down again.

"Hmm, okay. Why did they think you could raise the dead? Neither of those seems like something that would actually—"

"I accidentally made the skeleton of a venerated high priest stand up," Mariel admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

Sloane started choking on her own spit. "Holy fuck. I bet that scared everyone."

"Yeah... Me too actually."

"How'd they figure out it was you, and you know... not just the will of the goddess?"

"My eyes turned black and Praetor Shalas was right there."

"Ah, yeah. She seemed pretty observant."

"She made me do it again later with a different skeleton..."

Sloane winced, her heart aching for the girl. That was probably not the right choice for a child. “Why?”

“I’d already been mending the broken bones of the paladins from their training. We thought I was a healer.”

“Ah. I understand. What’s your path name?”

“Acolyte.”

Of Death!

Sloane had to try really hard not to laugh. It was a near thing. The situation was serious, and she had to act like an adult for Mariel, not make immature remarks.

“Alright, well... crap. Your path actually does seem to be centered around bones. That’s alright. I have an idea.” She turned and shouted to the others who were practicing. “What’s the cultural opinion on using bone tools?”

Nemura and Stefan shared a look, and then both shrugged. “Not entirely unusual, just not normal around these parts. Why?” Nemura shouted back.

“No reason!” Sloane called back, ignoring the incredulous faces, and turned back to Mariel. “Alright. New plan. We’re going to get some bones for you first. Tools. We’ll trade out that knife for a bone one. I want to see what you can do. You can *animate* skeletons, right? Does that mean you can give them intent? Like I have done with Tiberius and Vesper?”

Mariel shrugged. “The second skeleton I made come back to life—”

“Unlife. Like your trait. They’re not really alive, and I doubt they have memories since you’re not affecting a soul or anything. You’re filling in the blanks with magic and just making them move. Kind of like I do with Tiberius. He’s not a real bird, but he acts like one.”

Mariel’s eyes widened. “Can I... can I try and make a bird like Tiberius?”

“A skeleton bird?” Sloane wondered aloud while stroking her chin. “Yeah, I think we can try that.”

The girl’s face lit up with excitement, a stark contrast to the nervousness from earlier. “Okay! What can I do right now?”

“Well, I thought you’d have more things to work with, so... for this training session, why not just go sit on the benches and try and get a better feel for your mana? Cycle it through your body and get used to having it flow to your hand. It’s natural to want to use something to focus your magic through. Practice your control of the mana inside of you, and when we get you some tools, we’ll go further. How’s that?”

“Great! Thank you, Sloane!”

The girl rushed off with a bounce in her step, her earlier apprehension seemingly forgotten. Sloane watched her go, a sigh escaping her lips.

This is going to be difficult.

“Whelp, nothing to it. My turn to practice I guess...” she murmured to herself.



Sloane stood in the training ground, her eyes focused on the target in front of her. She took a deep breath, feeling the flow of mana within her. She had always relied on her spells, but now she wanted to try something different. She wanted to cast a spell using runes as Aila did.

In her mind, she pulled at her [**Runic Knowledge**] and closed her eyes as she concentrated on the runic matrix of her [**Mana Bolt**] spell. In her mind, she saw the overall rune which was more like a large array of smaller runes all forming together to create the spell. She could feel the flow of mana within her, waiting to be shaped and directed.

A single flick of her mind and she knew she could cast the spell. The *imprinted* spell.

This made her think of something else, *If I create a better version of the spell... can I overwrite the imprinted version in my mind?*

It was something to test another time.

Slowly, she began to weave the runes together in front of herself with mana, using her knowledge of runes and mana itself. She used her alteration and artifice to manipulate the size, strength, and speed of the spell along with a lot of other minute changes. It was fascinating, and the more she delved into the matrix, the more she felt confident that she was at least grasping the basics.

The first attempt to actually cast it failed, the runes slipping through her mental grasp like water through her fingers. She frowned, feeling a slightly larger drain on her mental stamina than normal. She tried again, focusing harder, trying to hold the runes together so that they could form into the spell properly. Again, the spell collapsed, the runes scattering like leaves in the wind.

Sloane took a deep breath, feeling a twinge of frustration. She had to get this right. She focused on the runic matrix again, feeling the mana flow within her. This time, she used her [**Artificer's Insight**] skill, narrowing her attention to the task at hand. She could feel the runes more clearly now, their shapes and patterns etched into her mind.

Determinedly, she wove the runes together, feeling them lock into place. The spell formed in between her hands, a glowing matrix of runes that pulsed with power. She could feel the energy of the spell, waiting to be released.

It strained at her mind, and she could feel it starting to unravel.

With a mental push, she released the spell. The runic matrix coalesced into a crackling orb of arcane energy for just a moment before the bolt shot from her outstretched hand, striking the target with a resounding thud. The target shuddered under the impact, a small scorch mark appearing where the bolt had hit.

Sloane opened her eyes, a smile of satisfaction on her face. She had done it. She had cast a spell using runes. It had taken three tries, but she had succeeded. She felt a sense of accomplishment, a thrill of having mastered a new skill.

She looked at the target and saw it hit the target with the force she wanted. She felt a surge of confidence. She could do this. She could use runes to cast spells. It was a new way of casting magic, a way that offered more flexibility and control.

Sloane turned to the others, her eyes shining with excitement. “I did it,” she called out, her voice filled with pride. “I cast a spell using runes.”

Nemura was watching with a strange look on her face. Finally, she replied, “Uhm, congratulations and all... but that was slow. We’d all have been sent to Relena and Mariel would have raised us from the dead before you managed to kill a single enemy with that.”

Sloane scowled. “It was only my first time! You know what, I’m going to use it to create a new spell.”

She glanced at Vesper and smiled.

As the others went back to what they were working on, Sloane’s **[Artificer’s Insight]** kicked in. Using the same method, Sloane delved into her mind with **[Runic Knowledge]** to create a new spell that would cause a temporary surge of mana and magical power within her golem. Something she believed she should call **[Arcane Overload]**.

It didn’t go as planned.

Every attempt was failing, and she felt herself grow frustrated.

After six unsuccessful attempts at creating the new spell, Sloane decided to take a break.

She walked over to a nearby table and picked up a jug of water, pouring it into a cup. She took a long drink, feeling the cool liquid soothe her parched throat. As she set the cup down, she looked over at Mariel, who was lying on a bench, her eyes staring up at the sky. Sloane couldn’t help but be

captivated by the young girl's eyes, which were swirling twin pools of the blackest black mana that looked deep and mysterious.

The girl was happily performing the task Sloane had set her on, and it made her feel a bit guilty. It was essentially busy work, but the girl had dove in with enthusiasm.

Sloane watched Mariel for a few moments longer, then turned her attention back to the task at hand. She had a spell to create, and she was determined to succeed.

She walked back to the center of the area and used both of her traits again, before weaving the runes together in her mind. After another three tries, she finally felt a change.

The problem was connecting the spell to Mana's Intent. It was new, not one already in whatever sort of database that contained all of this knowledge.

With that in mind, she opened herself up to mana, letting her insight guide her in how to connect the matrix she was building with the Intent.

With a determined effort, she wove the runes together before finally feeling them lock into place. The spell formed in between her hands, a glowing swirl of runes and magic that pulsed with power. She could feel the energy of the spell, waiting to be released.

But just as she was about to succeed, she felt a massive surge of pain in her head. It was as if her brain was being squeezed into a vice.

The pain was so intense that it brought her to her knees.

She screamed out in agony, clutching the sides of her head. Her vision blurred, and she felt like she would pass out.

She let the spell drop just before it could try to imprint on her mind, and she gasped for breath.

The pain slowly receded, leaving her feeling utterly drained and disoriented.

Everyone rushed toward her, and she lifted a hand to her nose, which came back bloody. She scowled at it.

She could feel the concerned eyes of her companions on her, but she couldn't bring herself to look up.

Sloane sat on the ground, her head in her hands, trying to catch her breath. The pain had been so intense that it had left her feeling weak and shaky. She could still feel the remnants of it, a dull throbbing in her temples.

She took a few deep breaths, trying to steady herself.

"Sloane! What happened?" Mariel cried out with concern as she approached.

"I fucked up," Sloane muttered, her voice strained.

Nemura knelt next to her, her hand holding Sloane's upper arm. Tiberius chirped, and Vesper moved protectively behind her. "What did you fuck up? How did this happen?"

"I just figured out something new about mana in probably the worst way possible," Sloane said, her voice still wavering.

"What's that?" Nemura asked, her eyes filled with concern as she held Sloane up. She didn't need it anymore, but she didn't stop the woman.

"Your mind can only handle so many imprinted spells at once," Sloane answered. "I managed to stop it in time, I think. If I would have gone through with the spell... that would have really fucked me up."

"How many spells do you have?" Mariel asked, her voice filled with worry.

"Seven."

She gently pushed Nemura away and stood up, her legs wobbly.

Stefan handed her a handkerchief, and she wiped her nose. "Thanks," she said. "Alright, stand back. I'm trying again. Something different this time. I'm going to try and remove one of my currently imprinted spells."

"Are you sure?" Stefan asked. "You were just bleeding..."

Sloane shrugged. "Nope, but I feel like I need to try it. Nemura?"

"Yes?"

"Catch me if I fall?"

Something flashed through Nemura's eyes, but it was gone before Sloane could register what emotion it was.

"Always."

Sloane nodded.

Her eyes closed as she again delved deep into her mind using **[Artificer's Insight]**.

The world around her faded away as she focused inward, searching for the part of her that held the key to her magic. In her mind's eye, she saw her core, a bright and swirling vortex of colors representing her mana. It was like a miniature sun, casting a radiant glow that illuminated the depths of her consciousness.

Orbiting her core like electrons around an atom were the runes of her traits, passive and active spells. Each one was a distinct presence, a part of her, a piece of the puzzle that made up her magical abilities. She could feel them, their unique energies resonating within her.

Sloane focused her attention on the scene before her, and as if responding to her will, the orbiting runes came to a gradual stop, spreading out around her core like planets in a solar system. She focused on the one she wanted, the rune for **[Flashbang]**, and drew it in with her mind. The rune zoomed in, coming to rest in front of her mind's eye, its intricate patterns glowing with a soft light.

Reaching out with her will, Sloane tried to dislodge the spell from its place in her mind. It was like trying to untangle a knot in a thread, each strand woven tightly together. She could feel the spell resisting as if it had become a part of her very being. But she persisted, her will unwavering, her focus unyielding.

Slowly, she felt the spell begin to loosen, the threads unraveling. It was like peeling away layers of an onion, each layer revealing another beneath it, and Gwyn knew how much Sloane hated that. With a final push of her will, she felt the spell dislodge from both her mind and core. But then something unexpected happened. A massive drain of her mental stamina hit her and instead of disappearing, the spell seemed to simply dim, as if the mana that made it up was released. Then, slowly, it moved away from the rest of the runes and seemed to fade until it was barely visible.

Sloane's insight helped her realize what was happening. The spell had gone dormant, no longer active, but still present, ready to be reactivated if needed. It was like a book on a shelf, waiting to be read again.

She opened her eyes, feeling a sense of relief wash over her. She looked around, seeing the concerned faces of her companions. She gave them a weary smile.

"I did it," she said, her voice tinged with exhaustion. "But I definitely don't think I have the stamina to create something new today."

Stefan stepped forward, his eyes filled with concern. "Maybe we should head back?" he suggested.

Sloane nodded, feeling the weight of her efforts. "Yeah, that may be best. But don't worry. We have plenty of time to work on this. We'll spend the next season getting set up in the estate Ilian is going to get us, and then we will hire people and get the center up and running. I want to travel the local area, visit the villages, and do our own search for Gwyn in this area. We're going to be busy. Are you guys ready?"

Everyone shared a look, a sense of determination in their eyes, and turned back to her.

"Let's get to work," Mariel said, her voice filled with resolve.

Sloane looked at the young girl, noticing that her eyes were still black.

We'll work on it, she thought, feeling a sense of protectiveness for the girl. They had a lot of work ahead of them, but together, they would all face whatever challenges lay ahead.