

For Everything Else

It was a late summer night, and the Vlatedian army had launched another one of its ill-fated probing attacks to test the reactions of the city's defenders. The siege had gone on for several seasons now, and still, the army had not yet devised a way to counter the terran's enchanted ballistae. Reports of Sovereign armies from the south had been coming in more frequently, and Ressa knew that General Razane feared that they would need to withdraw soon. In fact, scouts reported a decent-sized army merely a month away. If the army withdrew, she would need to reassess her mission and figure out how to proceed without the support it provided.

"Wait. Allow the patrol to pass by," she ordered her team. They all dropped to the ground and shuffled to avoid view by the soldiers above them on the wall. Every patrol at this time of night took approximately ten minutes to get out of sight.

These soldiers are so predictable. They had long memorized the various patterns those on the wall would undertake. With the army patrolling the streets and searching for her team, it left most of the wall relatively defenseless in just about every area except the sides facing the army. That didn't mean the army could take advantage, because unfortunately, the Sovereigns had a respectable response time. Especially in the areas facing the army.

As she usually did, Ressa used the next ten minutes to run through the situation.

A quiet fluttering whistle sounded and she glanced up. The section of the wall closest to them was clear.

"*Quiet. Move out,*" she whispered.

The group slowly made their way to the wall and followed it for another twenty meters. She moved to the front of the group and felt at the remnants of her magic. She cast her **Dispel Conjunction**. Yellow mist appeared in front of her and quickly dispersed. A small tunnel materialized in its place on the outer wall of Marketbol. The same method of entry they'd used nearly the entire time. Although, her magic naturally dissipated after about two days, depending on the size. It required them to re-enter the city, or at least reapply the magic at least that often.

She waved her team on and one-by-one they moved into the tunnel. Ressa glanced around one last time then moved in and used her **Conjure Illusion** and **Alter Conjunction** to replace the missing wall perfectly. The soft sound of slowly scrapping stone tiles announced that her team was entering the building that was butted up against the outer wall. She pulled herself up and into the small room, then followed the team to the next spot. Another round of magic removed part of the ceiling and created a basic ladder. The team scrambled up into the small space between the ceiling and the roof of the structure. As she replaced the missing ceiling piece, Ressa let out a deep breath. *We may need to relocate soon.*

She glanced around and saw her people already settling in for the rest of the night. Two would stay on watch, while the remainder would sleep. They had brought enough food and water for two days. The building was used solely as storage for a small merchant company, however, the siege left it relatively barren. Alexi handed her a blanket and she quickly, and quietly, placed her things to the side so that she could attempt to get comfortable.

As she lay there, waiting for sleep to take hold, her mind wandered.

Ressa and her team had spent the entire time attempting to sabotage the city and draw out the terran. She was lucky that the Empress had understood the difficulty she was causing. In fact, if it wasn't for the war going so well elsewhere, she was sure there would be more of a push for her to end things. As it stood, they had managed to keep the terran bottled up in this city for some time. Their armies in the east had moved south, out-maneuvering the Sovereign reinforcements to take the city of Valecan and crush one unprepared army from the plains. Even now the bulk of the Vlaredian forces moved south toward the strategic bastion of Earthenwilde where they would meet the remainder of the central plains' armies.

Her status within the army afforded her knowledge that many would not be aware of. Such as the fact that they could only commit so much of their forces to this war, and that a lot of it was currently moving to the border with the Kingdom of Avira. They needed to project strength to their other rivals.

She didn't have an in-depth awareness of what was happening west of them, but she did know that the fleet and transports with another of their armies should be assaulting the Sovereigns by sea. The thing Ressa was most worried about was whether her nation could keep its momentum going. If they got dragged into a wider war, she was not sure the empire could

weather it. In her opinion, they needed to make their point by expanding their borders and then consolidating their gains.

If the army currently besieging Marketbol managed to hold out until the eastern forces arrived to relieve them, the empire would be in a solid place to make demands. After all, the strongest armies of the Sovereigns had always been those within the southern cities.

A few days later, they retreated out of the city, their attack on another warehouse complete. Observations of the terran's manor taken. All told, a complete success.

No one had seen a thing.

* * *

Sloane walked past four guards, two of which were from the Banking Guild, into the Runic Hall. Her place of solace. Her sanctuary of craft. A place she'd used to escape the world and her thoughts. The former temple to Erbium, the dwarven God of Crafting, would one day play host to dozens of enchanters, runecrafters, and artificers.

As she made her way into the main area of the hall, she noticed Orthan sitting at a table, focusing on something. Sloane smiled as she observed the young man at work. His pens and quills were lined up neatly, in a row, smallest to largest. He had two inkwells near the corner of the table, perfectly angled and spaced with the corner and each other. He had a clean stack of specialized parchment they had specially made on the left, just out of the way of his resting arm. A single piece was in front of him as he worked on an elaborate-looking design with a rune centered on the parchment. She instantly knew what he was working on.

They had previously discussed a project that seemed ideally suited for the boy. Attempting to take a specialized piece of paper that included a small amount of metal filament and create a spell scroll.

As she watched the boy work, she used her **Mana Sight** and noticed that his designs were not just to improve the look of the scroll. They would likely help the scroll hold its magic

longer. The enchanting ink flowed smoothly and his magic worked to dry the ink almost immediately. The current runework was set up for a **Mana Bolt** spell.

She tilted her head in thought, and seeing he was nearly done, she spoke up, “Orthan—”

“Do not interrupt,” he cut her off and finished the last bit of the rune. He wiped the head of the enchanting pen off with a small cloth that he had on his right side before returning it to its assigned place. He did a thorough check of his work before nodding once and turning to face her.

“Lady Reinhart. I have completed the first spell scroll.”

She smiled. “I see that, Orthan. How long did this one take you?”

He looked around and then down at the scroll. “I believe it required four bells, Lady Reinhart.”

She hummed. “That will drive up the price if they are that difficult to make. Maybe—”

“A moment.” He reached down and grabbed another piece of paper, setting it next to the completed spell scroll. His hands hovered over the two papers and she watched as mana flowed through him and into the papers. A blue glow seemed to transfer from the completed sheet to the blank one, and then, after but a moment, an exact copy appeared.

“I forgot that you could do that.”

“It does not work with the Runecards. Thus this would be the first time you would have seen it, Lady Reinhart.”

“Still, Adaega had mentioned it. May I?” she asked, gesturing to the copy.

The boy nodded and handed it to her. She gazed down at the paper and examined it with her sight. Grabbing the original, Sloane realized that she could not tell any difference in any of the material. *Including the ink...*

“Orthan, could you please make another copy and ask Ms. Kemmy to analyze the enchanting ink? I would like to make sure it is indeed the same material.”

“Yes, Lady Reinhart,” he said. Orthan glanced around. “What are you working on today?”

She smiled, his curiosity was always high when she got to work. He *loved* runes and everything that could be accomplished with them. His one sore point was that he could not alter materials as she could, so he had to etch and engrave runes the old-fashioned way into metals or other materials. Another project of hers would hopefully fix that limitation, and she hoped to give it to him before leaving the city.

In her spare time, she was working on two true enchanting pens. These would be enchanted themselves, and have gems inside of them to perform true magic. Ideally, the tool would allow the enchanter to use the pen to *alter* any material they wished to inscribe.

“I am going to finish the Runecard database for the Banking Guild. I received something that I had been waiting for, finally.”

Orthan jumped up and followed her as she walked over to her workbench. The Guild’s guard that stood by the wall nodded to her, and she to him. On the table was a box that had been delivered, and was the reason for the guards.

Opening it, Sloane removed five softball-sized blue cores. Another elaborate container inside contained a massive black diamond, along with other large gemstones that she would need. The diamond though was easily over five hundred carats. It was staggering how much wealth lay in front of her. *Well, at least on Earth. Gemstones are more abundant and less valuable here.*

She took a deep breath. She looked at the pedestal that stood to her left, the outer casing open and showing what work she had done thus far. Behind it was a more *functionally* designed version that she had used to test the concept. Things she had learned in that process were... interesting. That model would be functional enough for some small town somewhere. The one that Sloane was completing now, was the main database. The one that would control everything.

The slots for the cores were visible, and the casing for the diamond was also ready. Grabbing her notebook from her ever-present satchel, she flipped to the page where she had worked on the design. She had chosen a pedestal option because it was something readily known here, a familiar design.

Looking back down at the gems, she pulled up her stool and got to work under the observant eye of Orthan and the respectful security of the Guild Guard. The central database of the Runecard system required a lot of details she had not initially accounted for. As always when

dealing with complicated runecraft, she fell back to a source of knowledge that was readily available. Namely her watch. Using it as a reference, she had created a complicated series of systems that worked together to create a large device that would allow someone to input, display, and modify information about someone's account.

She fitted a topaz, sapphire, and a small pink sapphire into their slots below a glass panel. The display would be powered by its own mana crystal and had a dedicated blue core. The display itself had a series of runic chains dedicated to displaying information within the database based on whose account they were working on. The Guild would maintain a copy of each Runecard, except theirs would be a management card.

A separate panel sat below the display with runes and letters, the world's first keyboard. It had taken a lot of work with Orthan to develop this world's version of QWERTY, but between the two of them, they had figured out the most efficient order of the alphabet. The boy had immediately requested her to build him a typewriter that she had described.

The management card would be used with the pedestal to select which account would be worked on. Next to the screen sat a card tray where the Guild's staff would place the card. There was a small set of matching gems that would connect with the card and facilitate the data pull.

All this went into the top of the pedestal. Next, she worked on the heart of the system. She put the oversized sapphires, diamonds, and other gems into the main board. Etched runes for **[Intent]**, **[Knowledge]**, and **[Calculate]**, and finalized the last remaining runic chains for the system.

After slotting the board into place next to the large black diamond used as the main storage that she had inserted earlier, it was ready. Opening the final panel inside the base of the pedestal, she slowly pushed a mana crystal the size of her hand into its slot. When the bracket snapped into place, the entire thing started to make a low humming sound.

Sloane stood up and stepped back as the runes lit up across its surface. The display came to life with a satisfying swirl of mana before it settled into blackness, while the letters and runes of the keyboard glowed up in a soft blue color. She grinned. *Finally!*

Sloane looked over at the guard who stood nearby. She needed a final piece that would test it.

“It’s ready.”

The man stepped forward. “Please give me one moment, Lady Reinhart.”

She nodded. The guard walked to the entrance and spoke to the guards that were just outside. He returned and asked her to wait while they retrieved what was needed. While she waited, she grabbed the other items that would be at the Guild. She prepared her workbench with two separate terminal devices. One allowed viewing someone’s account, while the other imbued cards for new accounts. That device was a small steel box that had two small trays for cards, along with a half-sphere with a smooth opal set into the top. The first terminal had gone through several designs, with the final one looking like an oversized calculator almost. It had a decent-sized screen that would pull data from the pedestal and display it, then it had a series of keys that allowed the teller to input values or perform other minor functions for the account.

Orthan stepped forward and looked over her work as they waited. When he turned around he noticed her smile. “I can see that you are excited, Lady Reinhart,” he stated a bit flatly.

She nodded. “I am! This is finally done. Now I just need to make sure it works, and train members of the Banking Guild in its use. What is your opinion of it, Orthan?”

He glanced back at the pedestal and then returned to look at her. “It is an interesting tool. I look forward to seeing other objects that you make.”

Her smile grew slightly. “Thank you, Orthan. I can’t wait to see more of your own work. The spell-testing platform has been simply marvelous.”

He fidgeted. The young man never really seemed comfortable being praised. “Thank you, Lady Reinhart. I simply contributed.”

“Your contributions were pivotal in its function.”

His head bobbed slightly.

She smiled again and turned back to her workbench, tidying it up while awaiting their next guests.

Within twenty minutes, a group of five people and two more guards from the Banking Guild arrived. A well-dressed high elf led the others and gave her a bow. “Lady Reinhart. We have brought the up-to-date records of an account that the Grandmaster would like to utilize as a test.”

She folded her hands together in front of herself. “Wonderful! Collectively, what House Reinhart specializes in is what we are calling magitek. A hybrid of magical and physical means to create a new form of technology. If you will look over here, I have every device that will be needed to establish a Runecard system within the Banking Guild’s Marketbol Branch,” she explained. A telv woman dutifully started taking notes.

Sloane continued, “I have also created detailed schematics that will allow members of my House to construct more of each device to fulfill your needs. Each location will have at least one of each. I would suggest the larger branches have multiple of each type of terminal,” she said, indicating the two different devices on the table. “Although you will ever only need to have one pedestal in any given location. This is important, and I will help set this up at the Banking Guild location here, but you must have each pedestal within seventy-five meters of each terminal. This will allow the devices to pull and update information within the database. I hope to expand this limit in the future, but as of now, that is all we have. The pedestals themselves utilize blue cores to increase their strength and connection to mana. This has the lovely side effect of allowing each pedestal to connect with each other.”

She resumed detailing the functionality of the system. The details of the wireless capabilities were something she had discovered late into the process. It was a welcome addition, that she did not know existed within mana, but in hindsight, she should have. Mana was everywhere, and when she put her intent into the devices, that intent allowed them to work together. She had a core within the pedestal dedicated solely to gathering and sending data between each device. These cores were pivotal in learning more about how the system’s Intent worked.

Since each terminal did not have cores, they did not have the capability to project their data and *intent* far, which limited their range. After testing with two prototype pedestals, she had learned that the core-powered devices seemed to be able to connect with each other no matter their range. *Well, at least as far as within the city is concerned. Testing did show that it functionally has no limit as long as mana exists. I guess we’ll see.*

That was something she did not know would happen. It was also the basis of another project she was working on with Adaega. *The Archive*. She just needed to figure out how to create a usable network without large blue cores facilitating a connection. *I will at least have the main system done before leaving, I can connect to it later when I figure it out.*

Maybe after Gwyn and I settle down somewhere if I can't make time during the journey.

Finally, after she explained what each device did, and how to best implement them, they moved on to operation.

One of the guards stepped forward and opened a small chest. Inside was a scroll, that when unrolled showed information for a single guild account. Hers.

She looked up at the high elf. "You intend for me to use mine? Is that not—"

"Do not worry, Lady Reinhart. We are all here to observe, and the Grandmaster is certain of your integrity. Now, please, walk us through the process of setting up a new card, withdrawing funds, and closing an account. Then I will do each step myself, followed by once more establishing an account which is where we will stop with your account."

Sloan looked down at the information written. "This seems incorrect. Orthan," she glanced at the young telv. "Could you please go retrieve Elodie?"

He quickly nodded. "At once, Lady Reinhart."

As he rushed out of the hall, the high elf glanced between the paper and her. "I assure you, Lady Reinhart, this is the most up-to-date information we have on your account."

She gave him a slight shrug. "I believe you. I would just feel more confident having the person who manages my House finances present. I apologize for not considering this sooner and having her present when you arrived."

He dipped his head. "I understand. Apologies are unnecessary. You are doing the Guild a great service."

She raised a brow. "The Banking Guild is paying me for it."

"Of course, Lady Reinhart."

Elodie walked in not long later, followed by Adaega. Orthan was not with them, and it seemed that the boy did not want to remain around all of the people.

“Lady Reinhart, you requested me?” Elodie asked.

“Could you please verify this information concerning our Banking Guild account?”

She glanced at Adaega with an expression that made Sloane think the two had a bet or something. Elodie’s smile as she lifted a book she had in the nook of her arm told her who had won.

“Certainly, My Lady.”

She looked down at the paper, furled her brows, and flipped through her book to a page toward the middle. Elodie tilted her head and gave the high elf a *look*. “This number is not correct, where are all of these extra funds coming from?” *Wait... extra?*

A telv stepped forward and whispered into the high elf’s ear. The man nodded and then looked between Elodie and Sloane. “The Grandmaster authorized the release of more funds to your account due to your completion of the first batch of required objects to establish the Runecard business.” The telv whispered again. “We were also made aware that you have a sufficient quantity of cards available?”

Sloane nodded slowly. “We do. We have enough for five hundred accounts.”

Elodie’s face was still filled with a mixture of complicated emotions as she flipped through her notebook. “This number still does not add up. I have right here the amount that should have been paid upon this milestone...”

“Ms. Romaris, your records are correct. The Grandmaster considers the remainder... a bonus, for continuing this project while the city is under siege.”

Huh. Hazard pay.

Sloane placed a hand on Elodie’s forearm and gently pressed down. The woman got the hint and closed her book, a slight frown still on her face. *I bet she’s simply upset because she wasn’t aware. She’s usually aware of everything.*

“Thank you. Now, let’s begin. First, you grab two cards.” She opened two different boxes. “One from the stack of management cards, and one for the customer card. You place both in their slots on the issuing terminal and press this rune here. It will start the process. When it flashes *four* times, it is ready for the customer.” She let the card get imbued and synchronized with the pedestal. “Now, have the member place their hand on the sphere with the opal. The terminal will flash twice when it is done.” She did so, feeling a slight rush as the system registered her mana signature.

The terminal flashed and she removed her hand and smiled. “Alright! Their card is ready. You can now do the next steps. Each card is ready to accept a gem based on the member’s tier and you can stamp their names and nation onto it. Meanwhile, another employee will take the management card to the pedestal.”

She handed the Runecard to Elodie and grabbed the paper from the workbench before leading everyone to the pedestal, where they all circled around it. “Now, you place the management card into its slot and let it connect with the database.” A series of flashes came before it settled into a nice solid blue glow. The screen swirled blue and then recognizing that it was a new account, entered into a series of prompts that would allow someone to input the initial information. She gestured to the telv woman. “Please, come here. I’d like to guide you through the process. It would add some peace of mind to me since it is my information.”

The high elf smiled and motioned the telv woman forward. She stepped to the front and looked at the display and keys. “It is asking me for the member’s name.”

Sloane nodded. “Yes! Now, this is what we call a keyboard. You simply press each key to input that letter of the alphabet.”

The woman pressed the first key in the Common alphabet that would spell out Sloane’s name. She guided the woman through the process and she quickly got the hang of using the keyboard, pecking at each letter as she read the display’s prompts. Sloane showed her the ‘enter’ button and the process continued, going through recording key information for each account that the Guild had requested her system maintain. When they had finished, she showed the woman how to finalize the card, which cued a series of flashes that signified the completion of the process.

Sloane removed the card from its slot and handed it to the woman. “Now, you would stamp this card with its relevant information and store it somewhere safe. This card will signify

that my account's origin is based in Marketbol itself. If I enter a branch elsewhere and their pedestal does not have my information, my personal card will tell their system to pull data from the Marketbol database. Which brings us to this terminal over here."

She returned to the final terminal. "You will want one of these per position at your counters for the tellers. Your staff will request the member's card and place it into the slot here. You have the member place their hand over the sensor to check their mana signature. The terminal will verify that they are who they say they are. Now, this is key. Once this process is complete, the terminal will display information about their account. You can only do minor changes to their account with this terminal. The keys here are numbers only, along with these buttons that shift through the functions available. You can add authorized users, remove authorized users, add funds, and remove funds.

"You press the button for the service you want to provide and go through the prompts. For example, we are going to add an authorized user." A new prompt showed up on the small display for the terminal. "This will allow me to add Ms. Romaris here to my account to utilize my House funds. She will be able to use my card and this will allow you to see her as an authorized party able to withdraw funds directly from the account without the card. The pedestal will then update the system within every Pedestal in the system. There is a dedicated system of runes and gems present to ensure the security of the connection so that it cannot be subsumed by another entity.

"Instead of updating every single account across the entirety of the Banking Guild, you will then only have to update the accounts on each pedestal. Every time I pull funds from my account in say, Swanbrook, my account is updated to my card, and information is synchronized with the database in this pedestal. Every time Elodie adds or removes funds here in Marketbol, my account will be updated everywhere."

For everything else... there's Runecard...

She pointed at another card that was slotted into the side of the pedestal, just below the keyboard. "It is imperative you maintain the security of this device. If anyone steals it, they will have access to everything. This is the slot for the security cards. Each designated personnel will have a card keyed to themselves—this function is possible on the pedestal itself—and the system will not work unless one of these authorized cards is present. I will explain that more when we set it up at the Guild. The card in it will be destroyed after we issue one to the branch manager."

The high elf nodded. “This is well thought out, Lady Reinhart. Thank you. Now, may we run through this process a few more times? We have a few other accounts we can use to test the functionality.”

“Absolutely! We can actually go through the process for everyone you’d like. Then I can make time to come over and help you get set up.”

The tely woman taking notes looked up. “Lady Reinhart, how many terminals do you have available?”

Sloane glanced at the ceiling as she counted in her head. “I have enough for fifteen tellers. I believe the branch here has... twenty?”

The woman nodded. “Yes, Lady Reinhart.”

“Fifteen will be enough for now,” the high elf stated.

Sloane smiled and launched into teaching mode. She ended up showing each person how to use the systems, answering all of their questions as they went. As the group packed up and several more guards entered to move the devices to a wagon for transport, she handed the high elf a notebook that she’d asked Orthan to help her write. It was an instruction manual. One that would help with each system.

“Thank you again, Lady Reinhart. When should we expect you?” The elven man asked.

“Give me a few—”

One of the senior guardsmen for the House, Gregor, rushed in. “My Lady! Your presence is requested, urgently.”

Sloane, and everyone else present, turned toward the guard who seemed winded. “Take your time.”

The man nodded as his chest heaved while taking deep breaths.

Sloane raised a brow, and then looked at the high elf. “It seems that I must apologize again. I am unsure when I will be able to meet. I will make arrangements.”

“Lady Reinhart?”

Sloane turned her head toward Adaega. “Yes?”

“Elodie and I can go with the guild members. We can help them get set up. You showed me all of this with your test version. Plus, I will have your instruction manual,” the woman offered.

“Are you sure?”

The two women looked at each other and both nodded. “Yes. We’re sure, we can handle it,” Adaega said.

“Very well, I leave it in your care. Please let me know if you require assistance,” She said, eliciting a series of affirmations from those present.

Adaega and Elodie stepped forward and started speaking with the high elf. Sloane motioned the guard to follow her off to the side, away from prying ears.

She kept her voice low. “Are you alright now? What is wrong?”

The man nodded, more in control of his breathing. *He must have sprinted here.* “A moon elf is here, a man named Cerulean. He spoke with Ser Ernard and I was ordered to find you. I was told to tell you that he has vital information.”

He glanced around at those gathered and leaned closer to her to whisper in her ear. “He found the Vlaredian woman.”

Her eyes shot open.

Finally.