
A Call to Artifice

Sloane woke up to the sound of rain battering on the window. Her eyes opened and she sighed at the dim light in the room. Mariel's light snores filled the space in between each plink of water against the glass. She glanced over to see a Mister Bigglesworth curled up at her daughter's feet like a real cat lazing about. Sloane wasn't sure what it was with their very-much not alive felines, but both tried really hard to act as such. It was such an oddity.

The rain threatened to lull her back to sleep, but that wouldn't do. So, being the responsible woman and mother that she was, she rolled over and nudged Mariel. "Hey, Mar. Time to get up. Go clean up and I'll go after you."

Mariel grumbled, but she did roll out of bed—knocking the bone cat out of the way as she did—looking like the very things she liked to raise into unlife. Her daughter definitely needed some coffee today, and Sloane couldn't wait to share it with her before heading to the meeting with the king and guilds.

Last night had been a late night of planning and discussion with the inner circle plus Nell—who was quickly moving toward that position as well. One of the things her daughter had brought up was how all of Sloane's decisions would affect Gwyn. It had been a good question, and one that her two closest friends only had a vague idea about.

In the end it was Nell who explained after chuckling: *"If Sloane abdicates for no reason, then it would be seen negatively. However, she is doing so in order to become a grandmaster of a new guild, one in a field that is quite literally taking the world by storm. It directly connects to this new magical thing that's everywhere, and Sloane is a huge part of that. It's shrewd, and I'm sure leaders everywhere will be taking note."*

Sloane had frowned, but when Stefan had asked Nell where she'd learned all about politics, the woman just smiled and tapped her nose.

There's more to that woman than meets the eye.

They'd all discussed that a bit more, but in the end both Sloane and Mariel were satisfied that what they were doing wasn't going to interfere with what Gwyn had going on. In fact, it was likely to help, because then there would be no confusion as to who truly led the family's House after they reunited.

It was good. It was perfect.

Manabound - Resilience

It also helped to reassure Mariel that they weren't going to just drop her off in Blightwych in the future. Eventually, after reuniting with Gwyn, the family would visit there to see what Sloane's friends had set them up with, but there would be no long term commitment for Mariel to stay. That had been something Ismeld had promised Sloane in the first place, after all.

Sloane was just deciding to get up when Mariel made it back to the room looking more awake than she had before. Her daughter's hair was still damp, framing her face in a way that accentuated her youthful features. "Mom, your turn," she said, rubbing her eyes and yawning.

Sloane stretched, letting out a yawn of her own as she pushed herself out of bed. She grabbed her robe, pausing to glance out the window. The rain was relentless, a steady downpour that seemed to wash away the weariness of the city. "Looks like we're in for a wet day," she mused aloud.

As she made her way to the bathroom, Sloane's mind wandered back to the impending meeting. The formation of the Artificer's Guild was a major step, one that would solidify her and her family's place in this world. It was daunting, yet exhilarating. She mulled over the potential discussions, the negotiations, and the alliances that would form.

Emerging refreshed from the bathroom, Sloane found Mariel sitting at the small table, scribbling in her notebook. The sight brought a smile to Sloane's face. "What are you working on there, Baroness?" she asked, her tone playful yet filled with pride.

Mariel looked up, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Just some ideas for my next bone friend. I think I can incorporate some of the new rune patterns you've been working on. If I add a core, I think it'll let it cast magic. I really think that'll help us. I also want to try and control more than one at once. I think we need to procure more bones since it's really draining to conjure them from mana alone."

Sloane chuckled, sitting down opposite her. "That's ambitious. But I like where your head's at. We can certainly explore that idea. Anything else?"

"Mister Boney is ready to use a caster I think. Can you make one or two?"

"Yeah, I can do that."

Mariel unsummoned Mister Bigglesworth, letting his bones fall before grabbing them up with her [**Telekinesis**] and storing them in her satchel, all while looking out at the rain. "I'm all set for the day. What's the plan?"

Sloane moved toward her wardrobe, rummaging through her clothes. "Well, after I'm done getting ready, we'll grab some breakfast and coffee. I have that meeting with King Tanyth and the guild leaders today. We need to finalize everything for the Artificer's Guild."

Mariel nodded, sitting down on the bed and watching her mother. "Okay. And after that?"

Oxylus

“After that, I thought we could spend some time in the city. Maybe do a bit of shopping or sightseeing. We need to make the most of our time here in Calling,” Sloane said, pulling out a comfortable yet elegant outfit suitable for a meeting with the king. “I’m going to be very busy with Alyce almost every day, but other than that, this may be the last time for a while we have access to some of these things. Want to go get our ears pierced?”

Mariel beamed. “That sounds fun! We definitely need to do it. Then we can maybe find some more cool things for the workshop or even some stuff for the House. Oh, and we definitely need more of that coffee!”

Sloane chuckled as she quickly dressed. “Absolutely. We can never have enough coffee.” She paused, glancing at Mariel. “You know, I was thinking about what you said last night, about Gwyn. I’m so happy about how you’ve kept her in mind in everything we do.”

“Yeah. She’s my sister, Mom. I can’t wait to meet her.”

“I can’t wait until you meet her either, Mar.” Sloane finished dressing and glanced at her reflection in the mirror, straightening her clothes. “Alright, let’s get going. I don’t want to keep the king waiting.”

As they left the room, Sloane turned to Mariel. “Remember, today’s meeting is important, but let’s not forget to enjoy our day afterward. After all, we deserve a little fun, don’t we?”

Mariel grinned, her eyes shining. “Definitely, Mom. Let’s make today a great one.”



Sloane, Alyce, and Mariel made their way through the palace’s corridors and toward the king’s office, the echo of their footsteps was a steady rhythm against the marble floor. The soft murmur of servants, guards, and visitors filled the halls. The occasional nods and respectful greetings from palace staff added to the sense of importance the day held.

It was about fifteen minutes before the scheduled meeting with the country’s guildmasters and they wanted to talk briefly before the conference.

Upon entering the office, King Tanyth rose and made his way from behind his grand desk to greet them. His smile was warm, and there was a spark of excitement in his eyes, a reflection of the significance of the impending meeting.

“Ah, Queen Sloane, Baroness Mariel, good morning,” King Tanyth said warmly, extending his hand as he approached.

Sloane shook his hand, her grip firm yet respectful. “Good morning, King Tanyth. Today’s the day.”

He nodded in agreement, his gaze briefly shifting to the rain-streaked window. “Indeed. Such favorable weather too, it’s almost as if it’s fate.”

Mariel, standing beside Sloane, giggled at the king’s remark, her eyes twinkling with mirth. “Yup, such a great day out there. Totally not a sign or anything.”

With greetings aside, the discussion turned to the finer points of their impending meeting. After talking about the whole thing, Sloane could tell Alyce was very excited to have Sloane take the lead. Privately, the woman had even confided that when she found her sister she would pass the whole guildmaster thing to her.

After coming to know Alyce, it was understandable. The woman had a mask that she wore in public. Alyce had said she would channel Katrina, her sister, since she was the one who would always deal with people when they were together. Alyce just wanted to *create*.

Sloane really hoped her new friend found her sister and she would do whatever she could to help her within reason.

The meeting today would essentially be a formality, Sloane knew. Even if the guilds were technically neutral and regulated separately from the governments, the king still held considerable weight within his own nation. If he wanted to, he could create an unofficial guild and the others would just have to deal with it.

But with Sloane having the support of the Banking Guild, the others would fall in line. The initial issue that had stayed the King’s hand before Sloane was that each nation had a guild council and one of the larger guilds would chair it. In Rosale, that was the banking guild. Although, any city with the headquarters of a guild would automatically place that guild’s grandmaster as the chair.

Stefan’s prior discussions with the Banking Guild had borne fruit. The prospect of Rosale only hosting a temporary headquarters of the new guild was a tantalizing one, ensuring the continued prominence of the Banking Guild’s guildmaster. He would maintain his seat while adding his support to Sloane in creating a new guild.

A few days ago, she had spoken with the king, because everything she’d learned had pointed to having the headquarters of a guild in your city or country was considered a boon. First he pointed out that having the paladin fortress of Dawn’s Rise gave them all the clout they needed.

But then King Tanyth chuckled and promised that they would be a center of magitech even if the headquarters was elsewhere. His plans to establish a college dedicated to magitech resonated with Sloane’s own aspirations and interests.

When she'd asked where he suggested the headquarters should be established, he pointed to the eastern part of the region. Ikios was a large continent, but the most populous and wealthiest part of the land was in the western regions. It was where the three peoples that made up the Loreni had landed during their great diaspora. So, focusing near Avira would be ideal. He mentioned that Lehelia had even started what was called an Adventurer's Guild—which made Sloane laugh. She had to admit, with all of the monsters going around, it was smart. It had to have been a terran that had created it, much like she was attempting.

Sloane was pulled from her thoughts by the door opening. King Tanyth thanked the servant and turned to them. "It's almost time," he said. "Are you ready, Sloane?"

She nodded.

"First, I promised you some information about your other daughter," Tanyth said as he walked over to his desk and grabbed a stack of papers. "This is everything we know."

They talked about Gwyn after that.

Her daughter's situation gave Sloane an opportunity, in fact. With Gwyn having her own acknowledged Royal House and apparently close ties with a ducal family along the coast, she could likely find a location there. The Duchy of Tiloral had several locations that would be ideal depending on exactly where Gwyn's holdings were. The capital, Strathmore, would not be a good location due to the presence of Empyrea City, which she gathered was something akin to the Vatican.

That left Anerval, a smaller city in the northwest or Maireharbora, a massive port city that was the kingdom's only access to the sea. Tanyth believed that it would be the best option if it were available.

"I'll look into it. If Gwyn does have ties with this House Tiloral, then maybe we can come to an arrangement."

Tanyth nodded, but after getting to the next page he frowned. "There's more."

His people knew that Gwyn was making waves and that her allies in Tiloral had been alienated from the two main factions of the nation. He then warned her that the reason for the ceasefire between the Sovereigns and Vlaredia was due to a war against Avira in the north.

Which Sloane found worrying, until he brought up something else.

"While I don't get much information, I am afforded a bit due to my relationship with Dawn's Rise," Tanyth explained. "I have received intelligence that suggests the Republic of Lymtoria is or was about to invade the Duchy of Tiloral in late Autumn. Based on when the information was gathered they very well may be in the process of doing so now."

She's in the capital. She's safe. But she did mention keeping her people safe... Damn it, Gwyn.

That... was even more worrying since it would put Gwyn in danger.

King Tanyth's expression conveyed a mix of resolve and regret as he spoke. "So, keeping that in mind," he began, his gaze shifting to Alyce, "when the Wanderlust is ready for its maiden voyage, I will sanction a trip as far as Lehelia. However, venturing beyond that point is out of the question. It's not just about your safety, Alyce," he added, noting her frown.

Alyce's frown deepened, her voice laced with a hint of protest. "Tanyth, you know I can handle myself out there..."

He interrupted, a hint of sternness in his voice. "It's not only about your capabilities. It's also about the image we project as a kingdom. My personal wishes aside, as king, my foremost duty is to uphold our nation's stance of impartiality. We cannot be perceived as taking sides in a conflict that could escalate."

Sloane exhaled slowly, processing the king's words. "I understand your position," she conceded. "We'll work within those constraints."

Her mind raced with contingency plans. Reaching Gwyn was paramount, and she'd do whatever it took to ensure her daughter's safety. She'd create golems to help protect Gwyn's people, and if things turned dire, she'd have no qualms about whisking Gwyn away to a safe haven, be it Blightwych or Rosale.

Her resolve hardened. The journey would take them through Lehelia, and then into Avira. Once there, she'd devise the best route to the capital, where Gwyn awaited. The plan seemed straightforward enough.

Easy.

Sloane's contemplation was broken by a knock on the door. It was time to leave. As she and the others rose to depart, Mariel intertwined her fingers with Sloane's, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. "We'll be fine. We got this," Mariel whispered with quiet confidence.

They walked in tandem as they followed Tanyth and Alyce, Nell trailing close behind. As they approached the council chambers, Nell unexpectedly announced her intention to join the meeting, causing Sloane to glance at her in surprise.

Nell offered a small, knowing smile. "Orders from the Archpriestess. This moment has been Seen," she revealed cryptically.

As Sloane and her companions entered, they were met with the expectant gazes of the various guildmasters gathered around a large, ornate table. King Tanyth took his spot in the center of the large table and gestured for them to join him to his right while Alyce sat to his left.

Once settled, Sloane took a deep breath, ready to formalize the decisions that would shape her future and that of her daughters.

The king addressed the assembly with a commanding presence. “Today marks a pivotal moment for our kingdom and all of Ikios. We stand at the threshold of a new era, one marked by magic, innovation, and collaboration. The formation of the Artificer’s Guild represents more than a mere administrative change for our kingdom. It symbolizes our commitment to fostering artificery across Rosale and beyond. Queen Sloane, a trailblazer in the field and the very individual that is behind many of the terminology of this new phenomenon, will take on the responsibility of Grandmaster. Many of you may not be aware, but she has already done much more than any other and for longer when it comes to Artifice. As the initial investor and backer of the Farum Magical Goods Company, she helped propel a small business into what is now the first built solely around magical items.”

He paused for a moment then gestured to the guildmaster of the city’s Banking Guild. “She revolutionized how the Banking Guild manages transactions, something that I know is being set up in the city as we speak. With her two Reinhart Centers, she has pushed boundaries and I look forward to seeing what more can be accomplished as our kingdom collaborates through this new guild. Now, please give a warm welcome to the future Grandmaster of the Artificer’s Guild, Sloane Reinhart.”

The group politely clapped as Sloane stood up and dipped her head toward the king. She thanked him and Alyce for all of their hard work and help for getting everything together for this momentous occasion followed by giving her thanks and appreciation to the guildmasters for joining them today, particularly the Banking Guild whom she had such great relations with.

She then moved to what they were there for. “As you all are aware, today we’re here to establish the Artificer’s Guild. This marks not only a new chapter in my life but also signifies my official abdication as Queen of a realm back in my former world. Granted, after three years, I’m positive my people back home have already initiated the succession protocols,” she added with a small laugh. “I do this because my time and duties now firmly lie here on Ikios. My world, like here, did not have magic before the Flash. Now, having experienced it, I have found a true calling in life. I cannot wait to see what we can create with this new reality. By taking this position, I am passing my other responsibilities to my daughters. My daughter Gwyneth will continue on as the head of House Reinhart, while my daughter Mariel will take on the responsibilities of the peerage granted by the royal family of Blightwych.”

She paused, grabbing her glass of water and taking a sip as everyone digested what she said. When she was satisfied, she continued, “I say this so that it is clear, my very purpose now revolves around artifice, and I cannot wait to show you and the world the possibilities to come. Thank you.”

The group clapped a bit louder this time, and the guildmaster for the banking guild asked what the plans for establishing a headquarters were. She glanced at Tanyth and gestured for him to take the question.

King Tanyth nodded. “We shall establish the temporary headquarters of the Artificer’s Guild within the Arcanum, with my Miss Alyce Maxwell as its guildmaster. Her work as my advisor has already laid the groundwork for this transition, and she will now extend her expertise to support artificers throughout the kingdom.”

Sloane interjected, “The final headquarters of the Guild will be established to the east. However, the Arcanum will manage operations in this half of the region. Additionally, I plan to travel and evaluate other areas to ensure our efforts are consistent and beneficial across the continent. I also wish to meet with the Archpriestess of the Church, as their insights and knowledge would be invaluable to our mission.”

At this, Nell stepped forward, and Sloane turned her head to get a good look at her. “The Church welcomes the formation of the Artificer’s Guild and its potential to aid the people. I bring a message from the Archpriestess: ‘We stand ready to provide support and share our learnings with the Guild. Together, we can bring forth a new era of progress and hope.’”

The atmosphere in the council chamber shifted from anticipation to action as one of King Tanyth’s advisors produced three official documents from a leather satchel. He laid them out on the table, their surfaces adorned with intricate calligraphy and the official seals of Rosale.

Everyone stood as the advisor read aloud. After he finished, the guildmasters approached one by one. They each took a quill, dipped it in ink, and affixed their signatures to the documents, solemnly acknowledging the formation of the Artificer’s Guild and the roles each would play in its success. The air was thick with the sense of a historic moment unfolding, as this was the second guild to have been formed since the Flash, so it was a huge occasion.

Sloane figured there would be more. If she had to guess, there would definitely be a Mage Guild or something of the sort. With all of the magic in the world, who knew?

Once the guildmasters signed, King Tanyth himself stepped forward. His signature, bold and decisive, added the royal assent to the agreement, cementing the guild’s establishment and the kingdom’s support for its endeavors.

Finally, it was Sloane’s turn.

She approached the documents with a sense of gravity, understanding the magnitude of what her signature represented. As she signed her name, she felt a mix of pride and responsibility. This was more than a mere formality; it was a pledge to nurture and guide the Artificer’s Guild towards a future filled with innovation and aid for the people of Ikios.

Oxylus

It also gave her a level of authority that few could rival.

Or it would once the guild grew.

Each parchment was neatly rolled and sealed with wax, signifying the formality and importance of the occasion. One was taken by the king's advisor to store within Rosale's archives, another was given to the guildmaster of the Banking Guild, then the last was handed to Sloane. To the slight confused looks of everyone but those who knew her, she slid the large rolled parchment into her obviously too small spatial satchel.

The expressions on everyone's faces were quite amusing.

She gave them all a knowing look and patted the satchel. "That's just a small taste of what's to come."

With the documents signed and put away, Sloane turned to Alyce, who had been watching the proceedings with anticipation. "Alyce," Sloane announced, "as my first official act, I appoint you as the Guildmaster of the Artificer's Guild in Calling."

The room erupted in applause, and while Alyce seemed somewhat uncomfortable under the spotlight, Sloane couldn't help but notice the look of adoration on King Tanyth's face. His eyes, filled with pride and affection, remained fixed on Alyce as if he were silently conveying his support and admiration for the newly appointed guildmaster.

Or because he was a lovesick man. Either way, it was adorable and Sloane couldn't help but ship the two.



Several weeks passed, and with it, all of the celebrations and the ceremony of founding a new guild had come and gone. It had been a fun time filled with amazing Rosalian food, wine, new friends, and family. After the festivities, Sloane and Alyce dove right back into their work. Which led to Sloane diving headfirst into a tiny slot with only her feet visible to Alyce.

"Alyce! Pass me my pen!" Sloane reached a hand out. She was crammed under the engine in a small compartment. They had just installed the core the king had given Alyce and Sloane was working on the runic framework to connect it to the rest of the ship.

Her hand flailed around a bit before it was grabbed by someone else's and something was placed in it. She pulled it back and squinted down at her enchanting pen. "Thanks!"

"Hurry up! We need to test the mana lines!" Alyce called out.

“You can’t rush greatness!” Sloane quipped back, her voice muffled by the tight space she was wedged into. She felt the intricate runic patterns under her fingertips, her mind working quickly as she traced new lines, integrating the core’s power into the existing enchantment matrix.

It took a bit, but she was getting it. Having to Alter nearly every runic line was... time consuming. And it didn’t help that...

Alyce’s voice echoed through the tight space. “We’re on a clock here, Sloane! We were supposed to be done an hour ago... er a bell ago!”

There it is.

Sloane rolled her eyes and used her **[Runic Knowledge]**.

“Got it, got it,” Sloane muttered, using her **[Artificer’s Insight]** intently as she traced the complex runes. The new core, a glistening orb imbued with an array of enchantments, lay at the heart of the engine. Its integration was crucial, the balance between raw power and precise control was a thin line to walk.

Sloane adjusted the runes, her pen gliding over the metal surfaces, leaving glowing trails in its wake. She could feel the mana coursing through the lines, a pulsating energy just waiting to be harnessed. But as she connected the last rune, an unexpected surge of power rippled through the framework.

“Whoa, hold on!” Sloane shouted, her voice tense. The engine hummed dangerously, the vibrations intensifying. “Alyce, I need you to recalibrate the regulator! Now!”

Alyce scrambled, tools clinking as she worked feverishly. “Adjusting. Tell me when it stabilizes!”

Sloane watched the runic array, her heart racing. The runes flickered, threatening to overload. She channeled her magic, her will bending the enchantments to her command. Slowly, the chaotic energy began to settle, the dangerous hum diminishing to a steady thrum.

“Stabilizing now,” she called back. “How’s the regulator?”

“Back in the yellow zone!” Alyce confirmed, relief evident in her voice.

With a deep breath, Sloane pulled herself out from under the engine, wiping the sweat from her brow. “That was too close.”

The first time Alyce had mentioned something ‘in the yellow’, she’d panicked and started looking for something starting to overload. Which had made her friend laugh, because yellow had the same meaning as green in Onyxhallow’s version of Earth.

“Yeah, forgot to adjust for the additional power the mana would generate.” Alyce grinned, her eyes shining with excitement and a hint of adrenaline. “But we did it! This thing’s going to fly like never before!”

Oxylus

Sloane nodded, her own grin matching Alyce's. "Yeah, it will. We still have a lot to go, but let's fire it up and see how it looks."

Together, they moved to the control panel. Sloane's fingers danced over the runes, infusing them with the last bits of her magic. The core pulsed with a radiant light, its energy harmoniously syncing with the ship's systems.

Alyce flipped a switch, and the *Wanderlust* hummed to life, its engines emitting a powerful yet smooth sound. They exchanged a look of triumph; their hard work was paying off.

"Look at that," Alyce marveled, watching the energy readings stabilize. "It's holding steady. I couldn't have done this without you."

Sloane laughed and gently punched Alyce in the arm. "Don't say that shit. You definitely would have gotten it. You've told me about your world, that you got this far just shows how brilliant you are. You came from a world with like no electronics and you basically went off of intuition. This is amazing. I'm just helping you catch up. Let's not even talk about how far behind *I* am when it comes to those terran saps."

Alyce chuckled. "Have you even talked to them or are you just spouting stuff again?"

"I'm totally just mouthing off. I met one human who came from an interstellar civilization and we talked for all of a beer. Never saw him again either."

They spent the next hour running diagnostics, ensuring every component was functioning perfectly. The thrill of success was palpable in the air, their combined efforts bringing the skyship to life. As they wrapped up, Sloane couldn't help but feel a surge of pride.



Over the next few weeks, the workshop became a second home to Sloane, a sanctuary where the amalgamation of magic and mechanics came to life under her skilled hands. Each day was a blur of activity, with Sloane at the heart of it, her focus unwavering as she pieced together the puzzle that was the *Wanderlust*.

Alyce was often at her side, her hands and mind just as busy. They worked in tandem, a seamless duo where Sloane would explain the more intricate details of how runes worked. She went over how gems fit into it and gave a rundown on how it related to electronics.

On the flip side, her new friend was always excited to explain all of the engineering she did. From the novel engines to how she managed to add a bit of **|Gravity|** manipulation to the skyship so it

could fly without a dirigible. When they worked together, it was as if Alyce's technical expertise melded with Sloane's artificing skills, creating a symphony of innovation and progress.

Mariel, too, found her place amidst the chaos. Her fascination with the mechanical aspects of the ship grew day by day, her natural curiosity driving her to learn and assist where she could. She became a frequent visitor to the workshop, her bright eyes absorbing every detail, every lesson that Sloane and Alyce unwittingly imparted.

One day, Sloane caught Mariel with one of Alyce's workers as the two tinkered with a small mechanical bird, her fingers deft as she adjusted one of its tiny gears. "What's this?" Sloane asked, her interest piqued.

Mariel looked up, a proud smile on her face then turned to the woman next to her. "Just something Linae and I've been working on. Thought it might be nice to have a little friend flying around the workshop."

The woman in question smiled and nodded. "She's been great to work with! She's quite deft at manipulating all the small intricate parts."

Of course she is... She works with tiny bones.

Sloane's heart swelled with pride. "That's my girl," she said, ruffling Mariel's hair affectionately. "Mom~!"

Whenever Alyce and Sloane weren't working on the *Wanderlust* they were discussing other things. It was nice. The woman had become more than a colleague, yes, but the ability to share with each other was great. They shared knowledge that others wouldn't and at this point Sloane could probably build her own *Wanderlust*.

One evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the workshop, Alyce called Sloane over to where Vesper lay, with her chest plate open. "I've never seen anything quite like her," Alyce said, her eyes scanning over the golem's intricate inner workings.

Sloane leaned against the workbench, observing Alyce's careful examination. "Along with Tiberius, Vesper is one of my proudest creations. She's more than just a golem; she's a friend, a protector."

Vesper lifted her head and gave a throaty meow, which had Sloane rolling her eyes. "Yeah, I'm talking about you, lazy cat."

Alyce giggled, her fingers gently tracing the runes etched into Vesper's metallic frame. "The way you've integrated these runes, it's... it's brilliant. They're so seamless, so fluid."

Sloane couldn't help but smile. "Thanks. I wanted her to be strong, but also graceful. Not just a hunk of metal and magic."

In that moment, as Alyce continued her meticulous study, Sloane was reminded of why she had embarked on this journey of artificing in the first place. It wasn't just about creating powerful tools or awe-inspiring machines; it was about pushing the boundaries of what was possible, about bringing imagination to life.

More days turned into more weeks, and the *Wanderlust* transformed under their collective efforts. The ship's engines, once a source of uncertainty, now hummed with a powerful, stable energy. The runes Sloane had reworked glowed with a steady, vibrant light and no longer needed an extra push of mana to work with the subpar ink that Alyce's team had been forced to utilize.

One great benefit was that all of this work contributed toward both Sloane and Alyce's steps significantly. Even Mariel had taken the time to work on her magic and she was nearing her path refinement. Alyce was still quite a bit lower at step forty-two, but she was making huge strides as they progressed.

But it wasn't all work. There were moments of laughter, of shared meals in the workshop or palace or even the tavern back at the inn, of stories exchanged under the soft glow of the arcane lamps Sloane had created one snowy day.

Now it was one of those afternoons that Sloane was walking through Alyce's workshop and she was a bit bored while Mariel was out with Nemura. Alyce was dealing with some guildmaster business that didn't really require her input. It was a rare moment of idleness for the Grandmaster, who usually found herself neck-deep in projects and plans.

Lost in her musings, Sloane's attention snapped back to the present when she heard her name called in a voice that was both commanding and warm. Turning, she found King Tanyth approaching her, his presence as regal as ever. Dressed in a finely tailored tunic and trousers, complemented by sturdy boots and a fur-lined wool coat, he cut an impressive figure.

The man could step into the modeling industry of her Earth and no one would bat an eye. Well, some women would try to bat their eyes at him. Unfortunately for them, that man only had eyes for one pink ombre haired woman whose face was covered in grease more often than not.

"Grandmaster Sloane," he greeted her with a respectful nod.

Sloane couldn't help but roll her eyes, a playful smirk on her lips. "We've been over this, Tanyth. Just Sloane is fine."

His chuckle was low and genuine. "Old habits, I suppose. My parents did their best to instill a sense of decorum in me."

She crossed her arms, her smirk lingering. "So, to what do I owe the pleasure? Alyce is tied up at the Arcanum today."

Tanyth's expression sobered, and he gestured towards a nearby workbench adorned with a couple of stools. "I need to talk to you about something important."

"What happened?" Sloane's light mood faded as she noted the gravity in his tone. They seated themselves at the workbench, and Tanyth produced a scroll from his spatial satchel she'd made for him—and sold for a hefty sum—then set it down on the table, sliding it across to her. "You might want to read this, but the short of it is that Lymtoria has launched an invasion into Avira. They've bypassed the Edimiss Line—which is what Avira calls the fortresses that line the border with the republic—and are pushing their forces through a small coastal kingdom to push their armies into the Tiloral Duchy."

Sloane sucked in a breath as she picked up the scroll. "Anything else?"

He shook his head. "That's all we know. I will admit that my kingdom does not have the best ability to gather information. We often pay for such knowledge from others or get it from the Order of Alos."

Sloane's heart sank as she unfurled the scroll, her eyes scanning the detailed report. "Do we know why they chose now to attack? Winter? That can't be smart."

And it really wasn't. Even this far south the weather was like Michigan in the winter.

Tanyth shook his head, his brow furrowed with concern. "It's not entirely clear. They could be leveraging the chaos of winter, or perhaps there's something going on in Meris that we're unaware of. Our intelligence network is limited. We *are* typically more focused on the Sovereign Cities that surround us. Although my generals suspect the Aviran Royal Army will quickly move from the Duchy of Edimiss to attack them. But we have no information on that."

Sloane exhaled sharply, the implications of the news was vast. Gwyn's people were there, whoever they were. Her daughter may want to return... *Shit... We really need to get there.*

"This complicates things..."

The King of Rosale reached out, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Alyce mentioned the *Wanderlust* is nearly ready. As soon as the weather permits, you'll have my blessing to set... sail? Fly?" He shook his head. "I don't know what the terminology is."

Sloane chuckled ruefully. "It does have magic sails, so set sail works. And thank you. The sooner I can reach Gwyn, the better."

As they continued to discuss the situation, Sloane couldn't shake the growing sense of urgency. The conflict in Avira was escalating, and every moment counted. Gwyn was caught smack in the middle of a two front war. Sloane needed to be there to ensure Gwyn's safety, all while trying to navigate the treacherous waters of a kingdom at war.

Oxylus

The meeting ended with a tentative plan in place, but as Sloane walked away from the workbench and the king returned to the palace, her mind raced with the challenges ahead. She would need to prepare more, to gather her resources and her resolve.

She had allies; it was time to call on them.



Sloane settled at the desk in her inn room. She had the small slate that Aila had put together sitting in front of her. It was time to get it working. She pulled out the pouch of gems, her enchanting pen, and her personal stash of enchanting ink that she kept aside for her special projects.

Then last, she pulled the admin runecard that was keyed to the Archive's **[Mana: Signature]**. She had a few more copies of it, and had left one with Aila.

She carefully pried open the rear of the slate and looked down at the work Aila had done thus far. Like other things her elven friend did, the work wasn't *perfect* but was at least *functional* and sturdy.

The mana crystal was carefully inserted into a slot on the left side of the slate and held a soft, steady glow even now. There were some open slots on the board just where Sloane needed them. She extracted a turquoise gem from the pouch. This gem they'd learned would enhance communication, Aila even suspected it would help with mental communication as well. It would serve as a vital component in establishing a stable link to the Archive in Marketbol.

With a slight tug, mana flowed into her core and she focused on letting her **[Artificer's Intent]** take over. Instantly the world shifted and all of her attention locked onto the slate. She positioned the gem carefully, and using her *Alteration*, embedded it into a specially carved niche near the center of the board.

Next, she selected a deep blue sapphire, its facets catching the light with a mesmerizing sparkle. The slate already had one sapphire, but this one would be used with the turquoise and a black diamond to facilitate the entire communication system. She placed it alongside the turquoise then grabbed her pen and started working on the pathways that would connect them.

Once they were connected to the existing framework, she added the last gem, a black diamond which would store the unique signatures of the Archive, the slate, and Sloane. She grabbed the runecard and gently let the card and gem contact each other. The process required intense concentration, her mind and magic entwining to encode the slate with the data it needed. In reality, it

only required a bit of mana along with her intent threaded through the two until she felt the signature of the Archive get stored, quickly followed by her own.

The final touch was a series of runes, which Sloane inscribed with her enchanting pen and the help of her **[Runic Knowledge]**. Each rune was built around enabling that connection that would be needed. Her hand moved with a practice ease that only came when she was in the zone and under the effects of her **[Artificer's Intent]** and with each stroke, the enchanting ink flowed smoothly to form the magical runes that instantly glowed blue with her mana.

As she completed the last rune, she closed up the rear panel then flipped the device over and tapped the **[Trigger]** rune that would activate the display. The slate's screen swirled to life as mana of all colors merged and filtered together with an ethereal light. Sloane exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding up until that moment. The illumination of the screen signaled an initial success, but now came the key part.

Sloane tapped through the runic commands, her fingers dancing across the various runes on the slate's screen. The surface pulsed three times, then the connection to the Archive was established.

With that handshake, the manatech pseudo operating system she'd designed all the way back in Marketbol, a culmination of months of work, began to update its progress, overwriting the minimal setup with the more robust version.

I'll need to send a letter to Aila. She'll need this.

They could merge the two branches, the one she'd developed in Marketbol, and the other one she and Aila made for the Excerpt Readers.

After a couple minutes, the screen pulsed again and the home screen showed everything she could access in the Archive. Sloane leaned back in her chair, a smile playing on her lips as she thought of the possibilities. She could now communicate and transfer information between her Centers and friends. This would be huge for both business and just keeping in touch.

A rush of mana surged through her, and laughed and relished the feeling as the essentia spread through her body like adrenaline.

Her smile grew as she tapped on the command that would save a note to the Archive. Hopefully, Adaega would see it and she could use it to respond.

So, being the nerd that she was... Sloane sent the only thing that made sense for the world's first mana-based text message.

| Sloane: *Hello World!*

In that moment, despite everything that was going on far away, Sloane felt a deep connection to her craft and a sense of pride in her abilities as an artificer. The journey ahead was filled with challenges and uncertainties, but she had another tool that she could use along the way.

Then a message popped up.

Marketbol: *About time!*

What the fuck?! She couldn't help it, she started giggling uncontrollably as her achievement was shot down almost instantly. She hastily sent a response.

Sloane: *Adaega? What?! How?! I thought I would be first!*

Nornport: *Greetings, Sloane. This is Aila. We've been sending communications back and forth on here for weeks. What took you so long?*

Sloane jumped up from her chair and flung herself onto her bed. Another giggle erupted from her as a lot of stress washed away. Of course her two brilliant friends would have already figured this out. Sloane had spent a ton of time just trying to travel to Calling, after all.

Still, she felt happy. A bit miffed that she wasn't the first, but they were her friends. So, being the friend that she was, she made up an excuse.

Sloane: *I've been busy helping build a skyship!*

Marketbol: *A skyship? Not an airplane? Tell us more. Elodie's going to be so mad she wasn't here. Oh, Ernard says hello.*

Sloane smiled and pecked out her reply. At least Adaega would understand. The woman came from a world that was similar to the nineteen fifties on Sloane's. But that part wasn't important, so she hit them with the first piece of big news.

Sloane: *Girls, have I got some updates for you. First, you're talking with the new Grandmaster for the Artificer's Guild.*

Marketbol: *About time. We will get Elodie set up as the Guildmaster for Marketbol. She's been looking for a new project.*

Nornport: *Register me as a member! I have no idea who will be the Guildmaster for the Nornport branch, but I'm too busy with the Center. Personally, I don't care! Who do I have to work with there?*

Sloane: *Alyce Maxwell, Aila. You've heard of her. However, before all of that, I need help from you ladies. I'm about to head toward a warzone in Avira, and I need every advantage I can find to get Gwyn to safety.*

Marketbol: *You can count on us. I'll call a meeting.*

Nornport: *Me too. Let me get Liora.*

It was going to be a long night, but Sloane didn't mind—she would just need to get a glass and bottle of wine. She needed every advantage she could get before leaving. It wouldn't be long now. She lifted her arm and scrolled through her Excerpt Reader, checking the notification.

[Artificer – Step 67 attained!]