

Moments of Bonding

Adaega took a deep calming breath as she sat down at her desk. She had just left the meeting where Lady Reinhart had spoken with the city's general, and Adaega was nervous. Marketbol was supposed to be safe and now they had been told that the city would not be receiving any help for some time.

Not to mention the attack two weeks ago on the Knights and Lady Reinhart. They did not know about it until she and Ernard had returned to the inn from their day at the campus. The sun elf had been extremely distraught and feeling guilty over not being present. A sentiment that Ser Ismeld seemed to also hold. That was the first time she had to comfort Ernard. The knight had come to her and told her more of what was discussed after, after which the man had broken down in tears from his torn commitments, his people could have died.

Both Ser Cristole and Lady Reinhart had been injured in the attack. She had nearly broken down herself to see such a strong man in such a vulnerable way, and she had sat with him, holding him as he expressed his grief. Long-held trauma and self-doubt had come out, and Adaega knew then that she would do whatever she could to be the support he needed. She knew she had trauma, she knew she was broken, but Ernard had given so much to her. He had pulled her from the brink and quite literally saved her life. Adaega Merbaker could be strong and would be a pillar that he could rely on. It was the least she could do for such an amazing man.

She was falling for him. Hard.

Adaega sighed. She had to be real with herself.

Had fallen.

"Get a grip, Adaega. It's not like you haven't felt these feelings before," she said aloud, attempting to convince herself. *I haven't though...*

She shook her head. One thing that had brought focus to Ernard, was the fact that the attackers couldn't be found. He had immediately put the House guard on alert, the two senior guardsmen understanding the threat that these soldiers represented.

Since then, Adaega and Ernald had redoubled their efforts in getting the Center to a point where it could contribute to the city and the House. She had been searching for another enchanter to assist the lady, for there had been an escalation that none of them had foreseen. One which of course was obvious in hindsight.

Her fellow human had been seriously injured by an attacker who had a level of magic that heretofore had only been demonstrated by the baroness herself. The knowledge of the Vlaredians having such capabilities jump-started an all-out commitment of the city's army to explore every option in the defense of their city. That led to the general and the council reaching out to House Reinhart to ascertain the extent of assistance the human could provide. Assistance that would heavily rely upon whatever Adaega could facilitate through the Center.

The meeting with the general and his commanders had gone on for hours and discussed the numerous contributions that the lady could provide. The vast majority of them were related to improving the arms of the city's defenders. After Lady Reinhart had elaborated on what she could do, the focus had understandably gone to the various siege weapons the city had in supply.

The past two and a half weeks had been spent hiring basic staff for the campus and searching for personnel to fill the more specialized positions. Elodie had contacted the Guilds and put out a general notice of hiring. Now they had several office staff along with general maintenance personnel. Ernald had recruited more guards as he had mentioned, and now he felt that the campus had a decent start in how many they would need. He had also recruited a quartermaster for the guard, yet she had immediately put the telv man to work managing the purchasing of supplies and furnishings for the entire campus.

Elodie had even hired a few attendants for both herself and Adaega, followed by another accountant who would be dedicated to the campus. Which was important, seeing as how Elodie had also laid the framework for the Runecard business.

Adaega had a newfound respect for the gorgeous sun elf woman. She was *busy* and she seemed to thrive in that setting. The woman maintained an office on the campus, but she had also started to staff another smaller location in the merchant's quarter for the business that would keep the campus afloat, as well as the head of their House.

One thing that had been a godsend was the cooks and kitchen staff that they'd hired for the dining hall that lay on the ground floor of the dormitories. Ever since the attack by the Vlaredians on Lady Sloane and the rest of the knights, everyone had been living on campus.

They had set up an office dedicated to the noble, even if she wouldn't be present most of the time. She stated when she wasn't there that it could be used for storage, but Adaega had resolved to maintain it as the woman's personal research area and had equipped it as such.

Which led Adaega to the problem she was having today. They needed someone who could also enchant similar to Lady Reinhart. Her attendant knocked and stepped into her office. The high elf woman was a complete professional and could handle anything Adaega threw at her. It had alleviated so much of the initial stress she and Elodie had just by managing their schedules and ensuring only those who absolutely needed them, got an audience.

"Ms. Merbaker, I know you said you would be busy for a while, however, Ser Ernard, Esquire Nadia, and Ms. Romaris are here to see you," the woman calmly informed her.

Adaega smiled and moved the personnel listing she was working on to the side, before straightening the rest of her desk. "Please, let them in."

She'd always make time for Ernard. *Well, within reason. I need to maintain my professionalism.*

Nadia's attendance was only a slight surprise. The woman had been a blessing since she had agreed to work with them. They had yet to find another esquire that they could add to the House itself, but she didn't mind as she liked the sparky sister of Stefan.

Her initial reaction of jealousy around Elodie had long vanished. The young woman was becoming a valued partner and friend in this venture. They had spent many a long night drinking wine while complaining about various interviews they had taken that day. One incident, in particular, had contributed to their strengthening bond and camaraderie, especially after the numerous bottles of a nice red Ernard had gifted her.

On the evening in question, they had interviewed a man for the position of the campus scribe, but the entire time the man had done nothing except stare right at Elodie's chest. Even after several subtle and not-so-subtle hints, the man had the gall to believe that Elodie was receptive to his sleazy overtures.

Luckily that same night, Lady Reinhart was working late on a project for the city. Adaega's attendant had caught on and the woman had left to get some assistance. The look on

the high elf's face when the noble's big teiv of a woman, Nemura, quite literally threw him out on his ass had Elodie and Adaega giggling all night.

The second time such an incident occurred, Ernald effectively banned either of the women from having interviews without a House guard present.

The door opened again and Ernald walked in with a smile, followed by a chatty Nadia and Elodie. The man looked at the two women who kept talking and shook his head before turning his attention to Adaega.

“How are you, Adaega?” he asked softly.

“I am well. You?”

“Good, but busy!”

The two women must have heard them speaking because they stopped talking to each other and joined the conversation.

“Adaega, we may have found someone!” Elodie said excitedly.

“Found someone for what?” Adaega asked.

Nadia chuckled. “In my search for someone who would be a good fit as your Esquire, I came across a noble House that has been making subtle inquiries into entering into ties with another House.”

Adaega blinked. “What... what does that have to do with us?”

The raithe woman looked around, her eyes focusing on what would eventually be a stocked wine and liquor cabinet. Disappointment spread over her face before she turned back to Adaega with a soft sigh.

“I did some digging. It seems the House is on its last legs. The head of the house, a baron named Amil Barat, is attempting to halt the decline. The man was formerly a member of the Ruling Council of the city, but a series of bad investments caused him to lose his seat. I was able to find out something that is important though...”

Adaega waved her hand, motioning the woman to continue.

“His son gained magic after the Flash. Magic that apparently helps with the boy’s profession of a scribe.”

Her eyebrows scrunched up in confusion. “Scribe? How does that work?”

The esquire shrugged. “I am not entirely sure. The boy is a master scribe, however. At seventeen, which is quite absurd. He has penned several official tomes and texts for the school here in the city, no less.”

Adaega nodded. While they eventually hired a scribe for the House after the initial disaster of an interview, the woman they had found did not have magic. The campus would likely be making many manuals and books concerning the work they were doing. Having a second would not necessarily be a bad thing. Having someone with magic *would* be beneficial as well.

She reached into one of her desk’s drawers and pulled out a notebook. It contained everything Lady Reinhart knew about magic and mana. Flipping through the pages, she stopped on the page that concerned domains and magic.

Looking back up at Nadia, she asked, “Do you know what type of magic he can do?”

The woman raised a brow. “No. Why would I?”

Adaega sighed. “Of course. Well, we should meet him. Lady Reinhart has been working nonstop with the army. Having someone who can create manuals of what our lady knows will be very beneficial. Especially when Lady Reinhart leaves the city.”

Ernald winced. “After the meeting with General Irileth, I am not sure *when* that will be. Gisele may decide to winter here instead. Especially with the army approaching, leaving may not be an option.”

Nadia looked around. “That brings up an amazing point. Why aren’t any of you concerned about the city being attacked?”

“If Ernald isn’t concerned, I know we will be fine,” Adaega stated, giving the knight a nod.

“The army seems concerned only in how long we will have to hold out from the siege. I have been able to observe the preparations, myself. Along with scouting that Lady Reinhart has been able to accomplish, the city’s military doesn’t believe the approaching army has the ability to breach the walls.”

Nadia frowned. “Then why are they coming?”

“It’s quite simple actually. The approaching army has always had Marketbol as its goal. It’s *the* key city in the plains. Take Marketbol, and you prevent all of the coastal cities along the western reaches from moving to assist by land. That will force them into either taking an absurdly long route south or trying to force them into counter-attacking the Empire by sea.

The Vlaredians mean to siege the city until it capitulates. They simply have to starve the city out and they can take it without losing a single man. By taking Marketbol, and if they can push as far south as Earthenwilde, the Empire will effectively win the war.”

Nadia pulled out the chair from in front of Adaega’s desk and sat down heavily. “So, that makes sense except for one reason.”

Ernald raised a brow and looked at the raithe woman. “What’s that?”

“Why did they attack now? Undoubtedly they will be at a disadvantage when winter comes and there are only nine weeks until it arrives. Surely, the city will not fall in only five weeks?”

Adaega looked at Ernald. That was an interesting point. For all the rush of the Vlaredian army, they were seriously on a time crunch.

The sun elf knight scrunched up in thought, but finally, he shrugged.

“I will admit, I cannot fathom their actions. Unless they somehow know that Mogogale did not have any army prepared whatsoever so they are attempting to take the city before reinforcements can arrive. In that case, we may actually have a fight on our hands. The leadership... should be aware of this as well.”

He seemed to become more and more nervous the longer he spoke, and she felt a bit distressed at that fact.

“So, about this House Barat. When can we meet them?”

* * *

Adaega and Ernald followed Nadia and a servant of House Barat. The old manor they were in was showing its age on the inside, but she could tell that the servants had maintained it with loving care.

They were led to a gorgeous sunroom that sat at the rear of the house that allowed a panoramic view of the beautiful gardens set around an area that was clearly meant for outdoor events as the manor was much too small to host large gatherings. It was an efficient use of space and allowed for the House to show off its “best side” to any guests.

An immaculately dressed telv man with silver hair sat in a chair facing the doorway and he stood as they entered. Nadia gave the baron a respectful courtesy. Ernald gave a bow, and Adaega gave a respectful dip of her head, as was appropriate in her country.

“Lord Barat, thank you for having us. I am Nadia Stanca, esquire. I represent House Reinhart of Blightwych, and with me is Ms. Adaega Merbaker—retainer of Lady Sloane Reinhart. Then, allow me to also introduce Ser Ernald Morin of the Knights of Haven’s Hope, who has contracted with the lady to oversee the security of her interests here in Marketbol.”

The telv looked between them and nodded. “Welcome to my home. When I received word that you were interested in a meeting, I was curious. However, after speaking with Markus, you got my attention. It seems your baroness is making waves in quite a short period,” he said, casually name-dropping the Grandmaster of the Banking Guild.

Nadia smiled. “I am pleased that House Reinhart was able to garner your attention. While I am aware conducting business at such an inauspicious time may be seen by some in society as poor form, we believe that our efforts may actually provide assistance to the city in a small capacity.”

The man nodded. “What is it that you are looking for? I suspect that is your area of expertise, Ms. Merbaker?”

Adaega dipped her head in acknowledgment. “That is, My Lord. I am the Director of the Reinhart Center. Allow me to tell you about what our purpose is and what we hope to accomplish. Perhaps after that, you can see exactly where we can be of assistance to each other.”

The man gestured for her to continue and Adaega launched into a rehearsed speech that gave a broad overview of all that Lady Reinhart wished the Center to be. She spoke of Lady Reinhart’s research and discoveries in Runecrafting, as well as the foundations the noblewoman had established for the field of artificing. She noticed the slight twitch in the man’s brow as she explained what runes were and what they could accomplish, as well as the advancements the Center had discovered in alchemy to facilitate the field. The man had many questions, and they all seemed to focus on runes.

She recalled Nadia explaining how the man was lousy at investing, a reason for his House’s current state, so she really tried to extol the potential of the Center.

By the time they had reached a lull in the question-and-answer session with the man, they had found themselves in a library with a glass of liquor. The baron had just sent a servant away to retrieve the true reason they had sought to meet with the House.

A short while later, a knock sounded at the door and a young man entered. His dark brown hair seemed to shine and was styled in a long undercut that swept to his right. The boy also sported the most vibrant hazel eyes she had seen on someone in this world yet. The green and brown ring of his iris was surrounded by specks of blue.

The boy himself had a youthful face and held a curious expression that clashed with the faintly aloof posturing as he came to a stop slightly further away than most would. His father seemed to be ready for it as he quickly gestured the boy closer.

“Orthan! Welcome, my boy. We have guests.”

The boy turned and tilted his head to the left. “Hello. Welcome to House Barat.”

Adaega caught Lord Barat's subtle wince, as if this were a common occurrence. “Orthan, I have already greeted them. We have been talking for the last hour now. They were just telling me about their research center in the scholar’s quarter.”

Orthan seemed slightly more interested after that and he turned and seemed to appraise them. His gaze stopped on Adaega and lingered a bit longer than comfortable. She lifted a hand to her mouth and gave a slight cough.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, young lord. I am Adaega Merbaker.”

“You are a terran,” he answered as if it was a normal response.

She narrowed her eyes slightly. “I am. My Lady is as well. I heard that you were a scribe?”

The boy nodded. “Yes. You come from another world?”

Adaega smiled, starting to understand a bit more about the boy.

“I do! Lady Reinhart and I have many ideas of what we can bring to Marketbol and Eona in general. In fact, you are actually one of the reasons I am here.”

His head jerked back, a comical reaction that his father mirrored.

“Him?” “Me?” father and son said.

Adaega glanced at the boy's father. “Yes. I was hoping you could show me some of your abilities as a scribe. We could certainly use a scribe of your caliber.”

“My... *caliber*?”

The word's meaning was not quite translating, it seemed. A development that had absolutely intrigued her when she had first learned of it. Where Lady Sloane had easily accepted the fact that they could understand another world's language easily, Adaega had delved into the fascinating phenomenon with gusto, even roping Ernard in to assist.

Their research into the arcane translation had shown that mana was actively translating the oral and written trade language of the various versions of reality each terran originated from, with Eona's Common. Another curious thing was that after more time spent studying the matter, she discovered that her native tongue and Sloane's were the same, yet had different names than her own Yoruban. Which was another fascinating deviation that made her hope to meet other humans. Or rather, *terrans*. *Another topic to explore.*

The discovery of the active translation had led to Adaega and Ernard bonding over their love of learning languages and the knight had started teaching her Stel'loreni—the language of the sun elves.

She chuckled softly as she returned to the present. “My apologies. One fascinating thing about the Flash is not just the many displaced terrans, but how mana seems to translate our two tongues so that we can actually communicate. We have learned that it struggles to provide *context* for some of the words. Which, in the end, simply makes the word sound like one you would need a definition for. ‘Of your caliber’ simply refers to the quality or level of your ability.”

Adaega gave him a wide overview of all that Ernard and her had discovered, including how one simply would not know they were writing a completely different alphabet that they'd never known before.

Orthan nodded along as she spoke, enraptured by her explanation of the translation function of mana. “You have more information on this *mana* and how it works in this way?”

Adaega caught Ernard's upturned lip and smiled, her eyes crinkling as she watched him. *He is so cute.*

The boy clearly thought she was smiling at him because his eyes widened in excitement and he seemed to almost bounce in place. “Allow me to gather my supplies!”

Lord Barat chuckled. “Excuse him, he has quite the excitable reaction to language and writing.”

Orthan came rushing back in with a gorgeous leather case that he set on the table in the room. Adaega walked over and observed as he meticulously set up all of his various quills, scribing tools, ink, stamps, and paper.

The boy even had custom tools that would allow him to draw the flourishes and border art that was popular here. *Similar to my own world, it seems.*

When he was done setting up, he looked over at Adaega and nodded. “I am ready, Ms. Merbaker.”

The boy picked up his quill and ever so lightly dipped it into the ink pot, before touching the tip to the paper. A subtle blue glow formed over Orthan's hand and traveled down the quill

before it settled on the point. He then took a deep breath and his hand... *flowed*. It was as if the entire paper had come from a printing press with how fast he was able to write. The words appeared on the paper literally through magic and left a soft blue shimmer over the letters.

Orthan then set another paper next to that one and placed a hand over each. His hands glowed blue and then shimmering blue calligraphy appeared on the blank sheet. It was a perfect copy of the first page.

He placed his hands down and turned with a massive smile on his face. "I would be interested in your opinion, Ms. Merbaker!"

She slowly shook her head. *He is perfect. Now, we just need to convince his father.* Aadaega glanced at Nadia and gave the woman a subtle nod before smiling at Orthan. "Orthan, that is absolutely fascinating. I wonder, what is *your* opinion on... Runes?"

Lord Barat's eyes widened as he understood what she wanted. Orthan's confusion quickly turned to excitement as she explained what they were and about Lady Reinhart's efforts.

Nadia turned to the baron. "My Lord, I do believe we should discuss the future prosperity of House Barat and how House Reinhart can help you rise from the ashes."

The man slowly nodded with a glint in his eye. "I would like that. I would like that, very much."