
Artificer's Insight

The gentle prodding of a metallic beak against her cheek roused Sloane from her sleep much too soon. She groaned, her eyes fluttering open to find Tiberius, her mechanical falcon, perched on the edge of her bed and staring at her with his beady onyx eyes and a sense of urgency that was hard to ignore.

“Five more minutes, Tiberius,” she mumbled, pulling the covers over her head in a futile attempt to block out the morning light. The falcon, however, was persistent, poking her cheek again with a soft chirp.

“Alright, alright,” Sloane grumbled, sitting up with another groan.

Rubbing her eyes, Sloane blinked against the morning light that streamed into the room. She glanced around, a wave of confusion washing over her as she registered her surroundings—she was in her bed, yet she had no memory of leaving the workshop or going to sleep. The last thing she remembered was working on her golem, the image of its emerging form still vivid in her mind, etching... She narrowed her eyes in thought.

She gave up and sighed, running a hand through her tousled hair as she attempted to shake off the lingering tendrils of sleep.

“Ugh, fine. Time to get up,” she muttered, pushing herself out of bed.

A knock sounded at the door.

Sloane gave her bird a raised brow. “You knew that was coming?”

Tiberius responded with an affirmative chirp, promptly taking flight and soaring over to the vanity situated in the room. He settled down, his mechanical eyes tracking Sloane as she made her way toward the door.

Upon opening the door, Sloane found herself greeted by the two servants who were assigned to her during her stay at the estate, their roles to ensure her comfort and meet her needs. The first was an older raithe woman with kind eyes and a warm smile that instantly put Sloane at ease. The second was a younger telv woman, who looked barely twenty, her eyes wide with a mix of curiosity and awe as she looked at Sloane.

“Good morning, Baroness,” the older woman greeted, her voice soft and respectful. “We are here to assist you in getting ready for the day. Lord Estos has invited you to join him for breakfast, and Ser Yemina will meet us when we are done here.”

Sloane nodded, stepping aside to let the women in. "Thank you," she said, her voice still rough with sleep. "I appreciate your help."

As the women set to work, Sloane couldn't help but feel a bit out of place at the idea of having servants, let alone two dedicated to her alone. But she understood the importance of maintaining appearances, especially in the presence of a noble like Lord Estos.

Well, that's not entirely true. Ismeld was a noble... basically a princess even, and she didn't care about any of this pomp and circumstance.

The younger woman helped Sloane pick out one of her outfits from the small stock that she'd had transferred from the wagon, while the older woman assisted with her hair. They worked efficiently and respectfully, their movements practiced and precise.

As they worked, the younger woman's gaze kept drifting to Tiberius, her fascination with the mechanical falcon evident. "He's amazing, Baroness," she gushed, her eyes wide with awe as she watched Tiberius preen his metallic feathers. "I've never seen anything like him before. How did you make him?"

Sloane smirked into the mirror while the older woman fussed with her curly locks. "A bit of magic and effort," she said.

The woman nodded as if Sloane had said the most profound thing in the world. As the two women helped her get ready, Sloane found herself sharing a few details about the creation of Tiberius, her words sparking a lively conversation that did much to make the morning just a bit more bright.

Once she was ready, Sloane thanked the women for their help which brought a pleased smile to the telv's face. But before she followed the two servants out of the room, she walked over to the window and opened it. "Tiberius? Go find and help Nemura. She could use your keen eyes."

Both servants stood stalk still with mouths slightly ajar as the golem let out a fierce cry before taking off, flying past Sloane, and out the open window.

With a nod, she turned back to the servants and gestured for them to lead the way, soon following behind, her steps measured and steady.

They were quickly joined by Yemina, the paladin falling into step beside Sloane. "Stefan is staying with Mariel today," Yemina murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. "Nemura is checking the grounds, to see if we've been followed again."

Sloane nodded in understanding. "I assumed as much when the servants said that you would be joining me. Tiberius is already en route to assist her," she added, earning a nod of approval from the paladin.

As they continued their journey through the manor, they eventually arrived at a modest dining hall. The room was dominated by a large table that could comfortably seat a dozen people, and at the head of the table stood Lord Estos. As they entered, the sun elf nobleman rose from his seat, a warm smile on his face as he greeted Sloane.

“Good morning, Baroness,” he said, his voice carrying a note of genuine warmth. “I trust you slept well?”

Sloane put on her best noble face, returning his greeting with a polite nod. “Thank you, Lord Estos. I did sleep well, although I was up quite late working on a project.”

The sun elf nodded, his gaze filled with understanding. “I was informed. I hope it’s not presumptuous of me, but I had some tea prepared for you,” he said, gesturing towards a steaming pot on the table.

At the mention of tea, Sloane couldn’t help but wince slightly as the memory of last night’s experiment flitted through her mind, and how the focus tea affected her yet again, but luckily she was nearly out of the stuff.

However, she quickly composed herself, replacing her grimace with a polite smile before replying gratefully, “Thank you, Lord Estos. That’s very kind of you.”

As they settled into their seats, Lord Estos turned his attention to Yemina. “I want to thank you, Ser Yemina, for helping to prepare my House Guard for what they should potentially expect. I hope that we will not be attacked, but I do not hold that hope with much weight.”

Yemina nodded, her expression grave. “Preparation is key, Lord Estos. We can’t afford to underestimate the threat,” she affirmed, her tone carrying the weight of what they’d all experienced over the last few seasons.

As they began their meal, Sloane couldn’t help but shiver as a sense of unease washed over her. Despite the assurance of safety and sanctuary, she knew the same promises had been given before by the Blades’ Guild only for the illusion to be broken numerous times by the cultists

Try as she liked, she knew that it was only a matter of time before they struck again.

I need to finish this golem.

As they continued their meal, Lord Estos turned his attention to Sloane. “Baroness, what are your plans for the day?” he asked, his gaze curious.

Sloane considered his question for a moment, trying to decide how much to tell him before responding. “I plan to continue working on my next project,” she said, her tone matter-of-fact. “It’s a rather large undertaking, but I’m confident I can complete it.”

Lord Estos's interest seemed to pique at her words. "May I see this project?" he asked, his gaze intent.

Sloane shared a glance with Yemina before nodding. *In for a penny...* "Of course, Lord Estos. I would be happy to show you."

As they continued their conversation, Lord Estos informed Sloane that the city council had been making inquiries about her. "It seems they are just now realizing that you have been one of the main targets of the cultists that have been plaguing the city," he said, his tone serious.

Sloane frowned at his words. "Do I need to meet with them?" she asked warily.

I definitely do not want to.

Lord Estos shook his head. "No, I will handle them. You have enough on your plate as it is."

Sloane let out a sigh of relief. "Good. I was imprisoned by the city and have no desire to interact with anyone within the government."

Lord Estos gave her a sympathetic look. "That's understandable, Baroness. I will do my best to keep them off your back."

Once they finished their breakfast, Lord Estos turned to Sloane once more. "Would you be amenable to showing me your project now, Baroness? I have some business I must attend to soon, but I would love to see your work before I go."

She glanced at Yemina, the woman giving her a reassuring nod. "I will go relieve Senior Guardswoman Nemura, milady. I will see you soon."

Good.

Sloane turned back to the lord and smiled. "Certainly. Business concerning us leaving the city, I hope."

He gave her a pained look. "I certainly hope so, myself, Lady Reinhart."

With that, they rose from the table, their breakfast concluded.

As they made their way to Sloane's workspace, Lord Estos and Sloane fell into a comfortable rhythm of conversation, speaking of the city, its people, and the current state of affairs. Sloane found herself sharing a bit about her work, careful to keep the details a bit vague. Lord Estos, on the other hand, spoke of his home in Rosale, his voice filled with a fondness that made Sloane smile.



Sloane looked down at the golem that lay next to the workbench, the golem had gotten much larger than the table would accommodate. *I may have gone overboard, this thing is massive. But hey, maybe I can add a saddle!*

Ilian Estos stood nearby... hovering... as he watched her work. After she gave the Rosale noble a brief overview of how the panther would function, he smiled and asked to simply observe. She agreed, even though she *hated* it when people hovered.

Like, pull up a chair and ask questions, don't just stand there over my shoulder, my dude.

“What will that do?” the man asked as he leaned forward... over... her... shoulder.

She nearly snapped at him but didn't when she saw the genuine childlike curiosity that shone in his eyes.

Sloane turned back to the blue mana core that she was working with and tilted her head. “It will allow it to communicate with Mana's Intent. Think of it as its brain,” she explained.

The man nodded. “Do you plan on utilizing other cores?”

She considered for a moment and then shrugged. “I am using a few, but I only have this last one of this size.”

“Would a black one of that size be beneficial?” he asked while staring at the core.

Sloane paused, her gaze shifting from the core to the nobleman. “A black mana core?” she echoed, her interest piqued. She had only seen one before, to have one of this size... her eyes widened.

“Yes, it would be beneficial,” she admitted, her mind already racing with the possibilities.

I know exactly what that can be used for.

Lord Estos simply nodded a thoughtful expression on his face, before stepping away and speaking to a servant who had positioned himself just inside the door.

Sloane blinked, taken aback. While the sun elf nobleman exchanged quiet words with the servant, Sloane found herself watching with a mix of curiosity and confusion. She had no idea what the man was planning, but she couldn't deny that she was intrigued.

The servant nodded at whatever his lord had said and then quickly exited the room, leaving Sloane and the man alone once more.

Lord Estos returned to his helicopter act next to her, his expression unreadable. “Please, continue with your work, Baroness,” he said, gesturing toward her panther. “My servant will return shortly.”

Sloane nodded, turning her attention back to the golem, and began working again, but her mind was buzzing with questions. Soon, though, she was back engrossed in her work and didn't even notice the servant return until he was standing next to the workbench, a small chest cradled in his arms.

He set the chest down next to the golem and opened it, and Sloane's breath hitched as she took in the sight of the mana core nestled within.

A black orb, larger than two of her fists, its surface shimmering with a dark swirl of mana just beneath that smooth exterior sat there, as if it was the most common thing in the world.

Sloane's gaze shot up to meet Ilian's, her eyes wide with surprise. "Where did you get this?" she asked, her voice filled with a mixture of awe and curiosity.

Ilian's lips curled into a smile, his eyes twinkling with a hint of mischief. "As I've mentioned before, Baroness, my House has its fingers in many pies within the trade world," he explained, his tone casual. "Consider this a token of goodwill, a gesture towards a potential future partnership."

Sloane blinked, taken aback by his generosity. "Thank you, Lord Estos," she managed to say, struggling to keep the astonishment from her voice. "I can definitely put this to good use."

Ilian waved her off, his smile broadening. "Please, call me 'Ilian', Lady Reinhart," he insisted, his gaze lingering on her for a moment longer than necessary.

Sloane returned the man's smile. "Then, 'Sloane', if you would," she responded, her tone warm.

Just as she was about to return to her work, the door to the workshop opened and Nemura stepped inside with Tiberius sitting on the armor that covered her shoulder. The tall telv woman's eyes narrowed slightly as she took in the sight of the nobleman, but she quickly composed herself and walked over to Sloane.

"Do you need anything... milady?" she asked, her gaze flicking between Sloane and Ilian. "And I would suggest not having your usual tea for when you... work."

Sloane tilted her head, a hint of confusion crossing her features, but shrugged. "Alright," she agreed, giving Nemura a nod. "I'll stick to water for now."

Nemura walked closer and whispered into her ear, "I caught sight of a few suspicious individuals. Stefan is keeping Mariel close. Can you finish this, soon?"

Sloane turned to look at the golem, pursing her lips and running through everything in her head. After a minute, she turned back to Nemura. "Yes, I think so. But I need to make some new magic first."

Nemura nodded. "I'll keep watch."

Lord Estos watched the exchange between the two women with a thoughtful expression until they fell into silence, and then after a moment, he cleared his throat, drawing their attention back to him. “I will leave you two to this, I really must attend to some business,” he announced, his gaze shifting between Sloane and Nemura. “It was an absolute pleasure... *Sloane*. Thank you for allowing me to observe your passion,” he added with a small smirk. He glanced at the window and back at Sloane. “I will be gone for most of the evening.”

He paused, his gaze lingering on Sloane. “I hope that by the time I return, we will have a plan for finding a ship,” he added, his tone hopeful. “I look forward to seeing the fruits of your labor.”

Sloane nodded. “I’ll do my best,” she assured him, her gaze steady. “Thank you again for the mana core.”

With a final nod, Lord Estos turned and left the workshop, leaving Sloane and Nemura alone. As the door closed behind him, Nemura sighed.

“That lord fancies you,” the woman said, her focus still on the door.

“Perhaps,” Sloane replied, hesitating with her hand on the black core. “I definitely caught a vibe from him.”

“That’s all?” Nemura pressed.

Sloane shrugged. “That’s all it will ever be,” she stated firmly. “I have no intention of staying in one place until I find Gwyn, and romance is the last thing on my mind. I’m not interested.”

Nemura nodded slowly. “Then I will make sure to stop any advances toward you.”

Sloane nodded, grateful for the woman’s desire to protect her, even in matters that were beyond her job description. Turning back to her work, she focused on the task at hand, there was zero need to dwell on men. Not when there was magic and golems to create.

Nemura subtly stepped away, giving Sloane the space she needed to concentrate on her work, allowing the room to fall into a comfortable silence.

Sloane stood there, staring at the golem while trying to consider the magic that she would need to create. It had to be something similar to **[Focus]**, a spell that would enhance her concentration and precision. But it also needed to mimic the effects of the Tè Luminoso, without the accompanying side effects.

Definitely a trenta sized task.

With a determined nod to herself, Sloane moved away from the workbench and settled onto the floor. She sat cross-legged, her posture relaxed yet alert. Closing her eyes, she **[Focused]** and pulled mana into her core.

The air around her seemed to hum with energy, a tangible manifestation of her concentration and determination.

Sloane could feel the blue mana settling into her, a comforting presence that she welcomed. She drew upon it deeply, letting it seep into her mind, filling her with a sense of calm and clarity, as she started to [**Meditate**].

My physical friends have magic-based enhancements to their attributes.

This is just like that.

As she continued to draw mana into herself, she could feel a shift in her perception, a change that was both subtle and profound. She grasped onto that feeling, delving deeper into it, submerging herself in the sensation. Forcing her Intent on what was needed.

She tried to open her eyes, but darkness remained. Panic surged within her, a wave of fear that threatened to overwhelm her. She clawed deeper, desperately trying to reclaim that feeling, that heightened perception.

Mana surged within her core, held back by an unseen force. It was as if something great and powerful was yearning to be released, a force of nature held back by a dam.

Her magic had evolved to only have a focus on destruction, about tearing down and breaking apart. But that wasn't what she wanted to be. She loved magic, yes, but she loved creating even more. Her magic should reflect that, she realized. Destruction should be a part of the design, not the main goal.

A sense of calm and determination filled her, she let go of her panic and settled into her core, into her very being.

I am Artifice.

And with that thought, she felt something shift within her, it was as if a veil had been lifted from her mind, and everything became crystal clear. Her sensations rushed back into her like a tidal wave and she gasped out in surprise.

Her thoughts were sharper, her focus unwavering. It was as if she was seeing everything for the first time, every detail standing out in stark relief.

A true path was revealed.

She *was* Artifice, and she would shape her magic to reflect that.

As she opened her eyes, suddenly, the path forward was illuminated by her [**Artificer's Insight**]. Every step she needed to take, every action she needed to perform, it was all so... obvious.

It was as if she had been given a blueprint, a step-by-step guide to... everything. It was a clarity of thought and purpose she had rarely experienced, more even than the focus tea, and it filled her with a sense of exhilaration.

With newfound determination, Sloane rose to her feet. She moved with a sense of purpose, her every action deliberate and precise. She returned to the workbench, her hands moving with a practiced ease as she resumed her work on the golem. It was as if she had entered her own world, completely engrossed in the task at hand. The room echoed with the rhythmic clinking of tools against metal, punctuated by the soft hum of magic being intricately woven into the golem's form as she etched the necessary runework.

It was a symphony of creation, and Sloane was the conductor.



Sloane stood amidst the quiet of the room converted into a workshop, her body slick with sweat and her breath coming in deep, measured gasps. The room was bathed in the soft glow of lantern light, casting long, dancing shadows across the floor.

Nemura was at her side, a cup of water held out in her direction. The tall telv woman's eyes were filled with concern, her gaze never straying from Sloane. "Are you alright?" she asked. "You didn't even notice when Stefan and Mariel came by to say good night."

Sloane waved her off, managing a weak smile. "I'm fine," she assured her, her voice hoarse from exhaustion. She took a deep, steadying breath, feeling the cool air fill her lungs. "Just... just give me a moment."

Nemura nodded, setting the cup of water down on a nearby table, and remained close, a silent sentinel in the dimly lit room. Sloane could feel the weight of her gaze, and it was comforting, in a way, to know that someone was watching over her.

Sloane closed her eyes and started a short series of breathing exercises, calming her mind and body as her mental stamina slowly recovered from the drain.

When she opened her eyes, she turned to Nemura and looked up at the woman, smiling. "There. That new... trait is intense, but no crazy side effects. Which is good, but it replaced [**Focus**], and I don't think it's quite as versatile. It's more... *focused* in its use."

Nemura frowned. "Don't think I didn't catch the pun, but in seriousness, you are sure there are no side effects?"

Sloane nodded. “Yes, I’m sure, but I definitely should not use this with anything except my crafting. I am unsure how it would affect me in combat, I’m worried it would actually be a detriment.”

A smile grew on the telv’s face and Sloane instantly knew she had erred. She quickly held up her hands in surrender. “Wait, wait. No! That wasn’t–”

“We’ll train as soon as possible. You will use it while you and I spar,” the woman said, her tone brooking no arguments that only made the terran groan.

A curious chirp caught both women’s attention and Sloane turned to the workbench to see Tiberius perched on the edge, his onyx eyes focused intently on the head of the golem. He let out another chirp while he tilted his head back and forth as he studied the intricate piece of workmanship.

Sloane followed his gaze, her eyes landing on the completed head of the golem. Her first golem was clearly recognizing the similarities with himself, the exact same steel and copper aesthetic that she’d used on his body.

The intricate runes etched into the metal surface glowed faintly in the dim light while the six onyx eyes stared back at her, their gaze unblinking and intense. A sense of satisfaction washed over her, a feeling of accomplishment that came from seeing the fruits of her labor.

She had done it.

She had completed the golem, and she remembered almost all of it.

Except for one last thing, something she had no clue of how to do.

Because all that was left was to bring it to life, a part she’d only done in a fugue-like state before.

Moving on instinct alone, Sloane drew mana into herself, the familiar sensation of energy coursing through her conduits bringing a sense of calm and strength. She reached out, her hand hovering over the open compartment in the golem’s chest where the blue mana core resided. With a deep breath, she focused on her Intent, and pushed into the core.

Suddenly, the world around her went black.

For a moment, she was suspended in nothingness, her senses devoid of any input, but then, just as suddenly, she found herself somewhere else.

Sloane stood in a plane of emptiness, save for the ethereal mist of black and blue that clung to an invisible barrier beneath her feet, swirling in a dance of light and shadow. And as she looked around, her heart pounded in her chest as she took in the surreal void in almost bewilderment,

because instead of any sense of impending doom or terror, she felt overwhelming contentment fill her, as if she *belonged* there.

Footsteps echoed in the distance, slowly coming closer. Not the steps of a person, but one of something with four legs, something striding forward with purpose.

She turned to see her displacer beast golem emerging from the mist, its runes glowing fiercely blue, the crystals at the end of its appendages shimmering with contained power.

It wasn't just a sight to behold. It was beautiful.

And I did that shit.

Sloane couldn't help but smile as the golem approached. It was massive, its back reaching her chest, standing at about one-hundred thirty-five centimeters tall. The golem's full length, from nose to tail, measured an impressive three meters, with two appendages protruding from its shoulders each extending an additional one and a quarter meters.

The sight of it was formidable, a clear warning to any who dared to threaten them.

The golem came to a halt before her, its head tilting slightly as it seemed to regard her with its six onyx eyes. Then, it roared, the sound echoing through the empty plane.

It was a lovely sound, a testament to the power and strength contained within the golem. A sound that she couldn't help but smile at, pride rising in her as she observed her creation.

Sloane reached out, her hand making contact with the golem's head. It leaned into her touch, making a synthetic purring sound that was eerily beautiful. But then its appendages moved, wrapping around her in a hug-like manner, that made her freeze slightly. It was not something she imagined those things doing, and knowing what lay beneath had her a bit nervous.

One did not simply hug weapons of mass destruction.

But then it pulled away to look up at her, its slight... subtle movements giving it an aura of intelligence that the gems it had for eyes never could.

"You're perfect," she said, her voice filled with awe and admiration. "And you're going to help keep us all safe."

The golem growled in response, then roared again, the sound reverberating through the plane. Sloane could only smile, her heart swelling with a sense of accomplishment and pride as the connection she had established with the golem was unlike anything she had ever experienced.

Sober, at least. Sorry, Tib.

Suddenly, without warning, she was yanked out of the vision.

She stumbled backward, her hand slipping from the golem's chest compartment as she was sent sprawling away from the workbench and landing on the floor.

An immense rush of energy flooded into Sloane, stronger than any she had felt before. She gasped deeply as if the air was forced from her lungs while her body trembled as she struggled to contain the surge of energy coursing through her. It was almost overpowering, akin to a tidal wave of force that threatened to sweep her away.

The edge of her perception recognized that her watch vibrated, but Sloane couldn't even force herself to look down as realization set in that she must have leveled multiple times at once, and the feeling was heady.

She shakily pushed to a seated position, her breath coming in ragged gasps as she tried to make sense of what had just transpired.

"Nemura..." she managed to gasp out and the telv woman was at her side in an instant, her eyes wide with concern as she grabbed onto Sloane's shoulder to steady her.

"Sloane, what happened? Are you alright?" Nemura asked, her voice filled with worry.

"When I touched the core, I was taken into a vision... or something. It felt like I was inside of some space where only we could reside," she explained, her voice steady despite the lingering shock. "I spoke with the panther. It was... it was incredible."

Nemura looked at her, her eyes wide with surprise. "You spoke with it?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "But how...?"

But before Sloane could answer, a movement caught their attention. Both women looked up, their eyes widening in surprise as they realized the golem was gone.

Vanished.

Their heads jerked around, their gazes sweeping the room in search of the massive construct.

Nemura turned to Sloane, her eyes filled with confusion. "Where did it go?" she asked, her voice quiet. "It's massive, how did it just disappear?"

Then, a low growl echoed through the room, causing both women to freeze.

Their eyes darted around the room in search of the source, and Nemura saw it first, her hand tightening on Sloane's shoulder in concern.

Approaching them was a strange distortion in the air, akin to a mirage or a ripple spreading across a serene pond. It was as if the very light in the room was being manipulated, bent, and twisted, creating a patch of space where reality seemed to blur and warp.

The distortion moved, a silent and ghostly apparition gliding across the room toward them. As it neared, the air around it seemed to shimmer and warp, the distortion growing stronger and more pronounced. It was a surreal sight, like watching a creature made of liquid glass prowling through the room.

Then, as if a veil had been lifted, the golem slowly reappeared. Its form rippled and solidified from the distortion, its head appearing right next to Nemura's. Its appendages, tipped with glowing blue crystals, were aimed at the woman, their light casting an eerie glow on her face. The golem's six onyx eyes stared at Nemura, a silent and powerful presence that filled the room.

The golem's eyes started to glow as it regarded Nemura, its body still and silent, as if ready to pounce. Nemura returned its look with a narrow gaze, but Sloane saw the hint of surprise and a bit of fear, as the woman's eyes quickly darted around as if assessing a way out of the situation.

Sloane let out a hesitant laugh that did nothing to hide the nervousness that filled her. "Nemura, I'd like you to meet... Vesper."

The golem growled again, the sound low and rumbling. But this time, there was a hint of something else in the sound.

Something that sounded almost like... contentment.