

The Blacksmith: Part 3

The castle was protected by a great wall connecting three watch spires. Once inside, Lana looked up at the two square towers of the castle joined together by what looked like a great cathedral with two steeples facing north and south. The lawns between the wall and the castle were immaculately kept by deer roaming in the yard, stretching out their long necks to forage weeds and grass. A pair of deer scampered away from the entrance as Devron led Lana out of the carriage into the castle proper through the great doors of the main hall.

A few servants bowed their heads to Devron and gave Lana curious looks. Even compared to the serving girls she felt plain, but Devron escorted her with grandness and authority that secured her confidence. It wasn't the haughty confidence she was used to seeing in court but a gentler certainty that made him well-liked by everyone he encountered in the hall. Lana appreciated something to distract their stares.

As Devron led them through the great hall, they turned left and entered a door flanked by a pair of guards wearing thick, plate armor. Lana noticed one of them was a bit small for it and wondered why the boy hadn't gotten it fixed yet. She filed it away for later and went after Devron. They entered a sitting room, well-lit by sunlight from a trio of tall windows, and a table and chairs made of ancient-looking oak. Lana noted a fine spread of fruit and cheeses in the middle of the table, with place settings and wine set out for five. The walls were made of red stained oak paneling with a large stone fireplace that was unlit today. Paintings of nature scenes and mythological figures adorned the walls, interspersed with ornate pieces of decorative metalwork.

"Please, help yourself," Devron said, gesturing to the chair. He crossed the room and opened the door opposite their entrance. "I will inform his majesty that you are here."

While she waited, Lana studied a pair of crossed, ornate swords over the fireplace. The handles were gold lattice, unmarred by gaudy jewels and a masterwork of craftsmanship from a technical standpoint. The blades were beautifully done with silver vines blooming into flowers etched into the pristine, flat edge. Lana was starting to guess at their crafter when the doors opened again.

King Regon had celebrated his seventieth birthday last year with great fanfare, but he looked younger. His head was hairless, though he kept a well-trimmed white beard that framed his face. He was slender, not content getting fatter with age or suffering the stagnation of most nobility in comfort. He was wearing a red tunic and had the gold crown of Adri on his brow with an easy grace. Lana bowed deeply and looked only at the king's feet as he approached.

"Your majesty, I present the Master Blacksmith Lana Occor: The Blade Angel of Adri. Lana, his royal majesty, King Regon: The Great Owl of Blue Skies!"

"No need for such long titles, Devron! This isn't one of your epics!" King Regon chuckled. He put his hands on Lana's shoulders and she dared to look up at him. "You may lift your gaze, Lana. Today, you are an equal in my court."

"His majesty is kind," Lana said, fighting to remember any royal etiquette she could. King Regon turned and raised his arm to a woman in a red dress with gold chains draped gently around her neck. She had a slender oval face with bright eyes and thin lips in the faintest hint of a smile. Her crown was little more than a gold band that kept her snow-colored tresses out of her face.

"My wife, Queen Amren. We are both so happy that you could join us."

"It is my honor, your majesties," Lana said. King Regon motioned for her to sit and situated himself between the queen and Devron, looking at Lana from across the table. The remaining seat to Lana's right was still set, but King Regon did not wait. He picked up his wine glass and selected a piece of cheese from the tray in the middle. Devron joined in eating, but the queen only drank from her wine glass. Lana followed the queen's example and only drank for now.

"Now then, to business," King Regon said, swallowing a morsel of cheese before continuing. "I trust your journey was well?"

"Most pleasant," Lana swallowed. "I especially appreciated the smoothness of the ride. I haven't seen many carriages with Windsor Axles like that."

"Windsor Axles?" The queen asked, confused.

“Well, they’re designed to move with the carriage...your majesty. They have springs built into them to absorb the usual bumps and divots in the road. However, they are more subtle than the traditional suspension style of supply carriages.”

“You see?” Devron smiled at King Regon. “A true master of the metal arts! The first thing she noticed was the carriage axles! She wasn’t so taken in by the shiny trimmings that may distract others. Couldn’t ask for a better blacksmith!”

“Agreed,” King Regon smiled. “I’m sure you have many questions, Lana. I’ll cut right to it. We need your help, your expertise.”

“I will offer whatever I can to help. Do you need new armor?”

“Armor is for war. I need something for a truce. Like King Vektor in ages long by, I am close to filling in the blank edges of the map. War and conquest have been replaced with diplomacy and alliances. Two more months and all the known continents will be counted amongst our friends. Old grudges will be buried and we may maintain harmony between nations for many years.”

“Truly, we live in times of peace.”

“And that pleases you?” King Regon asked, surprised. “I might assume peace is bad for a blacksmith's business.”

“War and conquest demand industry: an abundance of tried and true weapons. It is in times of peace that we may not only duplicate but create and innovate.”

“And I ask you to innovate,” King Regon said. “I need you to craft a war staff.”

“A staff?” Lana asked. “Peace does not require weapons, Your Majesty.”

“The end of this conquest needs a symbol. King Vektor had the Adriran Spear made in his time. It served as a symbol of his justice and wisdom, so much so that it became synonymous with our great kingdom. I seek such a symbol, not to use in great battles. After some time at my side and in great ceremonies, the staff will serve as a museum piece, like the spear now.”

“You must forgive me,” Lana frowned. “I can’t.”

“You have crafted impossible weapons before,” Queen Amren said, “I have held the Sword of Lorad myself: light as a feather and strong as iron. Lorad tells of the blade offered no resistance in his swing on the battlefield.”

“And it is that legacy that makes me hesitate, Your Majesty,” Lana frowned. “I have made what many would consider great works of war. I was...proud of my weapons once. It wasn’t until I saw the horrors of war—forgive the phrasing—that I felt the true impact of my creations. I saw that same sword you praised cut through a man and it struck me: he had a family. There was a history that man had until that weapon stole his last breath. And it was my hands that crafted the tool of his demise. Again and again, I saw my weapons and their legacy fortified in blood, not water. I could no longer be a part of that cycle. I only make armor now, trying to protect people from that pain.”

“You seek to make amends for your guilt,” King Regon nodded, reading through Lana with critical wisdom. “I don’t believe in only asking for forgiveness. I see a necessity for rectification. And I would never ask you to break your oath to clear your conscience. Rest easy knowing this war staff will never taste blood.”

Lana let out a low breath and frowned. She had made tools of war: to protect and destroy. Lives lost and spared were incalculable, but she was unsure if she could ever truly set her scales as equal. She had sworn against ever using her skills to make weapons again. Symbols didn’t factor into her oath and it was being demanded of her by the king. She could refuse, but his will was to be done by her or another.

“And it will only be a symbol?” Lana asked.

“A piece for portraits,” King Regon assured her, “and a few ceremonies. My days on the battlefield are far behind me. And I swear to you that only my hands will wield it.”

“Then I will craft this tool for you,” Lana said. “Though as I choose my words carefully, I ask you to choose yours. I would prefer to simply call it a staff.”

“I say ‘war staff’ only to emphasize my interest in the design. It may be a tool for peace, but I seek an instrument that exudes...power.”

“Meaning this will be no simple walking stick,” Devron said, “it’s a symbol of authority as much as peace.”

“That can be arranged,” Lana said. “I will start work on the design immediately.”

“In due time,” King Regon said, “you can work out the details with your partner on this project.”

“Partner?” Lana asked.