

## The Blacksmith: Part 5

Jada watched the carriage pull away from her room in the east tower. The blacksmith's other designs littered the floor of her chambers, runes drawn and redrawn to the point of illegibility. Dozens of runes from every conceivable language covered the slate wall on the far side of her room, but Jada only cared about one. And the few precious runes she had were not going to be enough.

War Mages were truly named: warriors first and scholars second. Jada had trained as a military mage for thirteen years and had never seen more than a skirmish or two in battle. After she finished her training, she was denied from the War Mages on the front lines, no doubt due to the meddling of her mother. Instead, she had landed a cushy job as the King's Mage. It gave her time to focus on the scholarly aspect of her learning, but she longed for the camaraderie of battle. Dusty books were poor company as they only ever gave her the same answers. Cold, damp, and unfeeling, the books told her nothing that experience would. And now she would have neither.

The servants were packing up her belongings in the main room, but she had declared her workshop off-limits years ago after someone had erased one of her slate boards. It took the staff three days and countless hours of negotiations to gain access to any part of her chambers. Her workspace was sacred, but now she was leaving it.

The clamoring in the main room stopped. Jada perked up as footsteps approached her workspace, preparing to rear on the fool who came into her workshop but stopped as King Regon's gentle face entered.

"Your notes were...extensive," King Regon said. "Trime was catching me up on all the words shared between you and the blacksmith."

"No doubt washed clean of my usual filth," Jada said, packing away her books. "I don't see why we can't have her here."

"The blacksmith has her things to look after. The staff will look after your rooms until you return. The blacksmith has no one."

"And we have an army of blacksmiths."

"This is about more than ability, Jada. It is about renown. Devron tells tales of her weapons and this symbol—"

“Again with the symbol!” Jada snapped, finally losing her temper. “It’s all about your beloved symbol for peace! What is the cost of this peace?”

“You speak out of turn,” King Regon growled, his gentle face sharpening. “Peace is what all people hope for.”

“I know,” Jada said, dropping her shoulders. “Forgive me.”

“Too much of your mother in you,” King Regon smirked. “Even when we were children, she would speak over our father when she believed she was right.”

“Did she ask you to put me on this project?”

“She requested it, yes,” King Regon said, “but I chose you carefully as well. Just as I wanted the blacksmith, I wanted you.”

“I’m not a scholar, Uncle...”

“You trained as a mage for war, but we are on the verge of peace. I want my family to be taken care of, as I do every person under my rule. You can become so much more once you unlock Darillic.”

“If I can,” Jada frowned.

“If you cannot, it will not be your fault,” King Regon said, putting a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Darillic was a myth until a few years ago. You have been given every advantage to this task. However, if I can be immodest, our family comes from a long line of wisdom. I know you can figure it out. There is no rush, Jada. You found ten runes of Darillic and their meanings. Once finished, this staff will be a symbol of that triumph, as well. I need you to work with Lana.”

“The blacksmith?”

“Her name is Lana. If you want my advice, use her name to gain her respect.”

“I understand.”

“This will become our family legacy, Jada. The Spear of Vetor and the Staff of Regon: the pillars on which we will build the second era of Adri. Not of war or conquest but of victory and peace. If you question me as your king, take my word as your uncle?”

“I’ll see it done,” Jada nodded. “Just...don’t change everything while I’m gone.”

“It will be as you left it, little one,” King Regon smiled. He embraced her in a moment of familiarity and rubbed the mage’s back. “Just as you left it...”

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Lana’s brow was thick with sweat by the time she had three samples she considered worthy of a king. They were a mixture of metals, some precious and some common, that eventually formed into qualities she liked. Upon finishing, she wrote careful explanations behind her choices and what she thought each metal could represent. She suggested gemstones to include with each metal but never insisted that they were necessary. Each letter was carefully bound around the ingot that Lana had formed from each collection and tied off with thick twine. When someone knocked on her door, Lana set an ingot aside to answer it.

“I hope you take no offense to my arrival,” Devron smiled in the doorway, “but I figured you would be up all night working. My visit, therefore, is twofold: to bring you well wishes from his majesty and to bring you breakfast from a nice little bakery down the street.”

“Come in, Devron,” Lana said, wiping her forehead with a clean towel. “I’ve been hard at work since our last meeting. The ride home gave me time to consider the metals and I have a few options for his majesty.”

As she explained each alloy to Devron, she ate pieces of a thick loaf of honey bread. The materials mattered and Devron seemed to understand the gravity of the decision. He took the metal bricks and put them into his pack. “I’ll send a falcon once his majesty has reached a decision.”

“Thank you,” Lana said. “Is...she here?”

“Jada? Yes. She’s very particular about how these things are done, so no doubt she’ll want to be overlooking it with a very critical eye.”

“Have you had much experience with her? She seems...”

“Brusk? Yes, I suppose she is. Beyond the reasons his majesty gave you, I think she has some animosity to this assignment. Too safe for her.”

“A thrill seeker?”

“Jada’s looking for a chance to separate herself from her family. She wants to make a name for herself.”

“Who is her family?”

“Lady Alstrid of Verdos,” Devron said. “She visits there once a summer when her uncle goes to visit them in the west.”

“Her uncle? As in...”

“Yes, the king.”

“So she’s a royal by blood? What is she doing as a mage?”

“As I understand it, she made it very clear that was her intention, with or without her family’s blessing. Naturally, her mother took it the chance for King Regon to exercise some of his power and bring her into his service as the court mage.”

“Doesn’t seem like she enjoys the position.”

“She’s more of an action-driven person. Given that she’s not in a position to advise her uncle's motivation, he seeks her counsel in mechanics rather than solutions. Her youth also makes her despised by other mages who want her position. Her uncle will consult with them more often, even if they lack her title.”

“So she’s a placeholder more than anything. Keeping it in the family, so to speak?”

“I wouldn’t bring it up. My understanding is that it’s a sore subject for her.”

“How can I work with her, Devron? She’s...harsh and aggressive. This sort of thing will take time and I doubt she has the patience for it. If she talks to King Regon—”

“It will only be to report your progress,” Devron assured her. “Don’t forget, she also has a responsibility to make the staff as well. King Regon gave her the opportunity, but he can give it to someone else if she cannot work with you. You hold more power in this exchange than she does.”

“I hope so. I’m used to doing this on my own. Having someone watching over my shoulder will be unnerving.”

“It won’t be forever, just until you finish the staff. She may be your partner in this, but she is not your superior. I’ll send back a report of the king’s metal choice first thing in the morning. If you want my suggestion? Give Jada some space. She’s adjusting to relying on someone else for a change.”

Devron took the bricks of metal with him and climbed back into the carriage. As the horses pressed onward, Lana let out a deep breath. There was plenty she still had to do. Even without the staff, there were client orders she had to work on, correspondence she had to keep up with, and a forge to tend to. After a few halfhearted attempts at shaping a new breastplate, Lana set her tools down. Dropping another log on the fire, she walked out of the forge and headed into town.