

## The Blacksmith

### Chapter 1

The fire in Lana Occor's forge crackled hungrily, reminding her to add another few logs. The wood pile next to the forge still towered to the ceiling and Lana never liked to have her flame extinguished. It was an old Adriran custom that a blacksmith's forge not go out. It would mean their craft would have no warrior's spirit causing their blades to shatter in battle. Lana knew no spirit who would embolden her creations, but disobeying customs like that hurt business.

Lana had spent years building a reputation, losing it all, and slowly rebuilding it. Her shop was simple, but she was content with the single forge and her anvil. Lana slept above her shop at night, working long past the tolling of the evening bell, and woke the rooster with the pounding of her hammer on steel. While she kept a few spare pieces of metalwork for sale like nails and cookware, her real money came from armor commissions. Even with her shattered reputation, nobility and those of means still knew the quality of her work. She would use gemstones in her pieces only at the customer's request. She hated mixing materials for the sake of inflating the value of her work. Grandad Occor had told her that a blacksmith's value comes down to the usefulness of what they made, not pretty things added.

Back beneath her capable hands, Lana worked on the pauldron on her table. It was a decorative piece that would go with the rest of the armor she forged. She had polished the steel to an ethereal sheen and spent the evening adding gold accents. Too much gold would be gauche for a duke. There may be some lesser earl trying to assert their status with golden armor, but Lana tried to assure them the metal was too soft for protection. The only ones who could afford pure gold armor worth protection were kings, but Lana doubted any of their armor would scuff on the battlefield. She thought that was fine. These days, Lana was quite put off by the idea of war.

"Blacksmith?" A voice called. Lana set aside her engraving tools and wiped her hands on her apron. She did her best to smooth out her hair so she wouldn't insult a potential customer by looking like a slob, but she worried she'd smudged her forehead with soot. It was too late to go back, Lana walked out to see the visitor.

A quick look at the man's military garb and young face suggested to Lana this was a messenger, so she relaxed at the thought of her appearance. He was wearing worn leather armor

and only had the fuzz of a beard. She smiled and walked out from behind the counter. “Can I help you?”

“You’re the Blacksmith Occor?”

“Lana Occor, if you don’t mind. My name was tied up with Blacksmith for too long, I prefer just Lana these days.”

“Very well,” the man said, holding up a small, folded note. “Message for you. A summons, actually...”

Lana let out a deep breath and rolled her eyes. She turned back to the forge with a huff. “You can kindly tell your liege lord I must decline,” Lana called over her shoulder as she returned to her table. “I don’t do house calls. If he would like armor, I can see him at his convenience, should he ever come to my shop.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” the messenger said, standing on the other side of the table from Lana.

“I humbly decline his invitation and ask that he accept mine in return,” Lana said, picking up her tools. “I can’t afford to close the shop for an entire day. The only way I’d accept this summons is if your lord is willing to pay me for a lost day’s work.”

“I think you’ll find he can arrange that.”

The messenger dropped the folded summons on the table, making sure the seal faced the blacksmith. Lana glanced at it but did a double take. She took the folded letter and brought the wax seal to see it better in the firelight. The owl grasping a spear seemed to glare at her through the seal, imposing its own will on her.

“It’s a crime to falsify the king’s seal,” Lana said.

“Then it’s a good thing his majesty need not falsify it,” the messenger said. “As I explained, he will gladly pay you for your trouble. He has a matter he wishes to discuss with you, at your earliest convenience.”

“I can come tomorrow,” Lana said, bowing her head.

“We’ll send a carriage for you first thing in the morning,” the messenger said. He bowed and left, latching the door behind him. It took Lana a while to do much of anything. Picking up her

tools, Lana had every intention of going back to the shoulder piece, but her hands froze over the metal as her mind started racing.

If Lana had done something illegal, that would fall under the purview of the town sheriff and they would skip the summons and bring the shackles. She had a great number of clients in the court, but no one who would want to shame her that she knew of. There was a war dwindling in the east, but she had already declined any business with the armies. King Regon had asked for her specifically, but even the context of the summons gave no details. The king had dozens of blacksmiths up to the task. Lana was no doubt talented, but she felt she was far from the greatest.

An hour later, her restless mind came back enough for her to see that she'd made no noticeable progress on the pauldron. Her mind split across her concerns for the following day and her work. "Don't fight a war on two fronts," she reminded herself. "Grandad was right more than once a day..."

Lana set her tools down and didn't add fuel to the fire. Embers would be acceptable until morning as long as some light flickered in her forge. Lana locked the door to her shop and climbed the stairs up to the bedroom, warm from the brick chimney by her bed and filled with the smell of burnt wood and hot steel. Even as she set her work apron aside, she was trying to work through every question her anxious mind would ask. Too often the answer was 'I don't know'.

Climbing into the soft mattress, Lana touched the chimney by her side and took a deep breath of wood smoke. The heat filled her lungs and she focused on the warmth passing through her palms and fingertips. With a deep inhale, she closed her eyes and rolled onto her back. Her palm was still hot to the touch when she gripped her cold, sore fingers on her other hand. As her body stilled, her dreams swam with images of the royal seal. In each dream, the King's Owl flew towards her—spear in his talons—ready to strike. She only had her armor to defend herself, but it splintered under the steel-tipped javelin of the royal bird of prey.

## Chapter 2

The carriage clattered outside the next morning and Lana was waiting for them there. She was wearing her finest dress of blue wool and had her hair arranged in an artful braid. She wore only a silver chain for ornamentation, with a silver pendant of a dove. It would pale next to anything the ladies of court wore, but she felt put together for a blacksmith.

The carriage was a work of art, both in design and construction. Lana knew these axle designs were to reduce the jostling of the passengers inside the cabin pulled by four white horses with fine tack. It was deeply practical, unlike the rest of the carriage design. A pattern of leaves that looked vibrant and real adorned the door and blended into a single handle. Gold leaf around the window made the lone inhabitant of the carriage look like a framed portrait rather than a person.

“Lana Occor?” The man asked, opening the carriage door and greeting her. He was tall with a beard that covered his square jaw and eyes like stone. His hair was brown and dappled with streaks of grey at the temples. He wore a dark blue tunic with gold buttons and a silver pin of an owl on his chest. “My name is Devron Dorric. I am here to escort you to the castle.”

“My lord,” Lana curtsied and lowered her head. She had heard of the master bard before, a former wanderer whose charm won an audience with the king and remained a loyal friend ever since. In Lana's town, his raunchier drinking songs were regularly bellowed in the early hours of the morning. He was as well known as she was, but people knew his face rather than his final product.

“Just a simple bard, my lady,” Devron smiled. “A friend of the king, nothing more. If I were to escort any member of the court, I’m afraid it would have been a grave insult. Alas, I was available and the king has a matter of some urgency.”

“Of course,” Lana bowed again and stepped into the carriage by taking Devron’s hand. “And I take no insult to pleasant company.”

“Ah, then I shall be on my best behavior,” Devron chuckled. He closed the door and knocked twice on the roof of the carriage. With a quick click from the driver, the horses lurched forward and pulled the cart onwards. Devron took out a small, silver flask from his pocket and held it out to Lana. “I’m afraid this may be the most I have to offer for refreshment, should you need it.”

“I graciously accept,” Lana said. She took a long sip from the flask and let the whiskey sit in her mouth for a moment before swallowing. “It’s not often I get a royal invitation and my nerves are getting the better of me.”

“Ah,” Devron nodded. “Rest assured, there is nothing you’ve done wrong. Only that he has a special project in mind.”

“The king has any number of capable blacksmiths, why not consult one of them?”

“The king has hundreds of blacksmiths,” Devron said, “and when it comes to arming the soldiers, he can rely on them to make the best short swords. But this is not a matter of ability, it is a matter of craft and talent.”

"The king has trouble finding talent?"

"Well, it's not only talent," Devron explained. "It's a question of renown."

"Renown?"

"There is a reason I am a good friend of the king, despite my relatively humble status," Devron said. "The king could easily have someone tell him that he has the greatest smiths and masters of the arts. Who wouldn't want to flatter him? He and I became friends because he had heard of me without having to find me."

"So he's looking for me because I'm famous?"

"Who wouldn't want a true, legendary blacksmith to aid them?"

“Can you tell me what he wants?”

“It would be easier for him to explain it than I,” Devron said. “All I know is that he asked for you by name. And he mentioned a handsome reward to promise you, should you have any reservations about joining us on our journey. And, naturally, you're invited to dine with the nobility this evening.”

“Well, I’m already a day behind,” Lana nodded. “What’s one more?”

“You know, I must say,” Devron said, crossing his ankle over his knee with a grin, “I am a little starstruck, truth be told.”

“Of me?”

“I’ve seen your work. The armory is filled with items of your construction. The Sword of Lorad, the Spear of Tripolin, the Roddon’s Blade...heroes in their own right! And for each swing

of their mighty weapons, you were there as their guardian angel, their guiding light, their--ah, it is not so often that a bard must confess himself at a loss for words!”

“I didn’t know they were on display,” Lana said. “I should like to see them again if they are so easy to look upon.”

“Are you working on something new?” Devron said. “Surely the next great blade must already be warming itself by your fire; an ingot waiting to take shape!”

“No great blades,” Lana shook her head. “I haven’t for a long time.”

“Oh? You made swords and weapons for legends all around! Who wouldn’t wish to buy your blades?”

“That story will need some more whiskey,” Lana smirked.

Devron took the hint and passed his flask over with a knowing grin. Lana took another long drink and sighed. The liquor was smooth and warmed her throat, but it did nothing to loosen her tongue.

The town rolled by outside of her window. Townspeople stepped aside and peered at the window as Lana passed, making her feel like she was on display. A few people pointed and whispered, rumors about her absence already spreading as the horses' gear jangled in the street. Before long, Lana could only guess their distance by a lone, dark plume of smoke that she knew came from her forge.

### Chapter 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 Vetor 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 Vetor 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.

## Chapter 4

The doors at the end of the chamber opened with a clatter, and Lana turned to the noise. The woman who walked in was roughly Lana's age, very thin with soft and unmarked hands. She wore trousers and a shirt like a man, but had a long coat that fluttered around her ankles. The woman had short, dark hair that was shiny and well-kept in a bob around her chin.

"My apologies, your majesty," the woman said, walking to the table and taking the last remaining seat. "My work stole time away from me."

"All is well," King Regon said. "We were discussing the staff with the blacksmith. Lana Occor? This is Jada Rommen. She is my court mage."

"Mage?" Lana asked.

"Some small piece of the old ways always exists in Adri," Devron said with reverence. "Mage Rommen has been the magical hand of the king for many years. She is well practiced in the charms and enchantments that the staff requires."

"So it will be a magical staff?" Lana asked.

"To exacting specifications," Jada said. "With all due respect, you can work metal, but the spell craft is my expertise."

"Now, Jada," King Regon gave the woman a friendly smile. "There's no need for such rudeness. Lana Occor is the greatest blacksmith of an age. As you have a talent for magic, she has a talent for metal."

"As long as she can do the work," Jada said. "When do we start?"

"I'll need some time to go over the designs with his majesty," Lana said, pointedly referring to the king. "I can also work with your intentions for the tool."

"Your designs can go through me," Jada said. "I will add my contributions as the design improves."

"Then it's settled," King Regon said. "The two of you can begin your work today, should you like."

"I will need to go back to my shop before the end of the day," Lana said. "I can't afford to be away from the forge for too long."

“It’s just as well,” King Regon said. “Jada will be joining you. We’ve arranged for her to stay in town...close enough to work together, but not an imposition. She has ways of contacting me, and we will work on the project together: the two of you there and me here.”

“With all due respect—” Jada spoke in.

“Taken,” King Regon interrupted, firm. “This is my will, Jada. I will not have it done any other way. Remember your oath.”

“Yes, your highness,” Jada bowed her head. Stiffly, she turned and looked over at Lana. “We’ll begin the design work when you’re ready, blacksmith. If you’ll excuse me, I have to prepare for our work.”

The mage stood and stormed out of the room, keeping upright until she pushed the door open with a heave. A handful of servers lingering by the door scrambled to look busy and avoid the mage's ire.

“Forgive her,” Devron pleaded to Lana. “She worries that her skills are being wasted. She is almost disappointed that peace is coming.”

“Who would think of peace as a disappointment?” Lana asked.

“Jada trained as a war mage before joining my court,” King Regon said. “She is very talented at what she does, but there will come a day when we will celebrate her no longer exercising that power. While you have adapted to a world without war—dare I say, look forward to it—she is eager to use her skills to help the kingdom. Without a war, she worries she’ll be nothing more than a court magician doing parlor tricks for our entertainment.”

“Do you fear she’ll break her oaths to you?”

“No,” King Regon shook his head. “I think she needs more time. The last time the kingdoms were truly at peace was over a thousand years ago. Not everyone will be prepared for what peace could look like in our modern age.”

###

The afternoon at the king’s castle was a flurry of details. Armed with stacks of paper and ink, Lana began to design the staff that the king wished her to breathe life into. Time and again, she would send her designs off to Jada through a messenger and enjoy a brief reprieve to take in some refreshments. No sooner than she would begin to relax, Jada’s corrections and criticisms

would come back. The mage defiled Lana's designs with vague details and 'minor tweaks' that upended the entire aesthetic. Her 'axe head' design met orders for more flat surfaces, while the hammer design 'required more edges'. Always, it was either too smooth, too sharp, too big, or not big enough.

As Lana was fit to pound her head against the stone wall, the details became clearer. In the end, the staff did appear as a weapon, but Lana willfully kept the design from being too hazardous. The staff's head was shaped like a cavalry hammer with a flat hammer's face and a sharp point with four flat sides. The pole was as long as the king was tall, and Lana had incorporated some pommel details into the other end. This satisfied Jada enough to send it off to the king, who came back with concise suggestions. The result was an elegant weapon with qualities of a spear and a war hammer. Lana finally accepted these adjustments on the condition that the blade would remain blunt. Everyone involved agreed, though the king more enthusiastically than Jada. Before the tolling of the dinner bell, Lana was in the courtyard again with Devron, heading towards the carriage.

"Jada will be arriving tomorrow morning," Devron said, walking calmly towards the horses. "She will be up most of the night packing away her things like a sullen adolescent, but we'll have her there by morning."

"Where will she be staying? I could meet her there."

"She'll stay at the Shepherd's Crook Inn, though I wouldn't recommend seeking her out. She'll find you tomorrow afternoon. The king will, of course, pay for any supplies you may need for this endeavor."

"I thank him. I'll start working with material samples tonight, and he can review them when Jada's carriage returns from delivering her."

"You'll be up that early?"

"I doubt I could sleep," Lana said. "It has been a long time since the mood to work has struck me like this."

"It is an admirable goal," Devron nodded, opening her carriage door. "A symbol of peace that we may all look to in the future. For the good of all Adri! I dare say this will require an epic

poem of its own...I can see the first few stanzas now: Fair blacksmithing maiden. crafts a staff so fine. Her hands made no weapons, but sought beauty divine."

"Beauty divine?"

"It's still a rough draft. The final version will be better! Rest easy this night, Lana. You have earned that much. Tomorrow, the true work begins."

Lana bowed to Devron again and climbed into the carriage. Traveling back alone, Lana recalled everything that had happened today. She felt alive and excited by the prospect of working with metal. This would require a valuable metal, not common steel. It would need to be something almost holy, but nothing so strong that the staff could be used as a weapon. Metallurgy had once made her mind spin, but now it made Lana eager to put on her blacksmith apron again.

## Chapter 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 Vektor 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...”

###

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.

## Chapter 6

Jada had gruffly dismissed the servants after they delivered her boxes. The books had a very particular order, and she wouldn't risk them dropping one of her bookmarks. The notebooks, the pens, and her candles all needed specific placement; even her clothing needed to be put away in her method. It was an old habit from her academy days. The first week she was training to be a mage, she was often late because she couldn't find anything after her mother's servants had unpacked it all in her room. She spent two days reorganizing and, since then, refused to let anyone handle her things in an unfamiliar place. There was a calming effect to the arranging and Jada was able to focus on ordering this new, strange world. Rituals weren't always magical, but Jada treated them all as sacred.

After she filled the two tall shelves of her room, Jada started putting the books on the windowsill. She decided this would be the improvised shelf for her old academic books, since they were hardly rare and the pages were already yellowing from sunlight. Setting the tomes up in order of height, Jada pressed the books up onto the glass face of the window. Stepping back to examine it, she noticed a shape pass by on the street below her. Looking beyond the books, Jada recognized the blacksmith, her hair braided back and wearing a simple work dress. Devron had mentioned visiting her shop, so Jada was surprised to see the blacksmith was out and about. She watched Lana turn away from the building and go into the local churchyard, deliberately stopping by the graveyard.

Through her window, Jada watched as Lana knelt before one of the graves and bowed her head until it touched the ground. She remained there for a few moments and then sat back on her heels. Curious, Jada took up her spyglass and peered through it. She couldn't read Lana's lips, but she did make out the writing on the grave: 'J. Occor'.

Watching Lana go through the prayer ritual strangely reminded Jada of her academy days. One of her instructors, an unyielding and powerful mage, had the students start each day with a salute to those who gave their lives fighting. It was such a part of her academy routine that Jada still did it every morning, offering a prayer to the warriors: those fighting and those slain. Her instructor had called it 'the Glorious Brotherhood' and Jada had never questioned it. It felt glorious to put one's life to protect another's. Moreover, she had felt like a part of something with the Battle Mages that made her unique among her family. And

then, with her training complete, Jada was taken from that fraternity she'd dedicated her life to, for her mother's own machinations in court.

There were fewer battles that Jada could win at court. Being paraded as the king's special mage had some benefits when it came to counseling in war and more when it came to her personal projects. Still, Jada wanted to be saluted, not hollowly praised. She didn't wear the laurels of her family name; she was suffocated by them.

After a few moments, Lana rose and returned to the main road. Jada noted that the blacksmith was religious...or at least observed some practices. She would have to find out more about J. Occor when she had the chance. For now, she had to focus on her slate board. Taking a small piece of paper from one of the notebooks, Jada arduously recreated the slate board from her workshop in the castle. At the core of it all was less than a dozen runes that could change everything. It would be up to Jada and the blacksmith to begin that change.

###

Lana was able to finish the detail work on the breastplate before the court mage arrived at her home later that evening. Jada was dressed in fitted trousers and a tunic with billowy sleeves, apparently opting to leave the formal cloak of the court mage at the castle. Before Lana had time to greet her, the mage moved into the forge as if it were her tower.

"What is the progress? Have you started?"

"I need to know the metal the king wants to use. We can't start until he decides."

"And you're telling me now?" Jada asked, annoyed. "I could have sent him a message. We could have started already! Tell me what the choices are and I'll go speak with him."

"Devron is bringing him a few ingots of the metals I've been working with," Lana said, trying to keep calm. "He said he will message me first thing in the morning."

"I should have been consulted."

"You were busy unpacking. I would have sent for you, but—"

"You're right, you should have," Jada spat. "And now we're wasting time. Never mind. Show me the samples."

"I don't have any more. They're with Devron, being examined by the king."

"So my trip here was for nothing? If we're supposed to work together, you should include me in all elements of the creation, including planning. I would prefer if all future correspondence went through me."

“Oh, would you?” Lana stifled a laugh. “And you’re well-versed enough in metals to discuss the process with King Regon?”

“I’m...I could figure it out!”

“Then tell me,” Lana folded her arms. “When crafting the blade, would you opt for the Dornian method for the edge or try the Rensid method first?”

“Whichever is more consistent with the design.”

“Design and function are two different things. We have a plan...a map. The actual destination—where the map takes us—won’t be decided until we’re there.”

“It’s metal work, just build as your design says!”

“This isn’t the usual mass-produced sword and shield in your uncle’s armories. This is an art that—”

“What did you say? Who told you the king was my uncle? Was it that blabbermouth Devron?”

“It—it shouldn’t matter. The point remains, I do know what I’m doing with these metals. This won’t be a blunt instrument to smack and slash at someone else. If I’m going to put my name to it? It will be treated as the work of art it’s meant to be.”

“King Regon,” Jada said sourly, “would agree. Fine. I will come back tomorrow. I trust that will be enough time to consult with him?”

“It will be. I could—should you choose—give you a brief background on the metals and our plans.”

“I don’t need you to lecture me.”

“If you want to be included in this project, I’d recommend getting familiar with what we’ll be working with. You’ll have your thoughts on each metal, I’m sure. Perhaps we make it interesting and see if you’re as wise as you’d like to think. Say...ten gold owls?”

“You want to gamble with me?”

“I want to make sure you’re paying attention. Ten gold owls says that you won’t pick the same metal as your un—as King Regon. If you pick the same one, I’ll be impressed. Win or lose, you’ll be slightly more learned in what it is we’ll be doing.”

“Fine,” Jada said, with a surprising smile. She reached into the coin purse on her hip and slapped ten gold coins down on the table. “Educate me, blacksmith...”

## Chapter 7

The next morning, Lana was ten gold owls richer. While part of her feared that Jada would get discouraged or upset, the difference in opinion sparked an interesting debate between her and King Regon. After receiving the message, Jada brought Lana with her to the room over the forge. Jada set down a Spell Wheel around a mirror and spoke an incantation. The glass cracked, reformed itself, and a spectral form of King Regon stood in the reflection.

“Ah, Lana Occor and Jada Rommen,” King Regon grinned. “Nice to see you together. I take it you’ve seen my answer.”

“Yes, your majesty,” Lana bowed. “I hope you found the—”

“We can’t use steel and amorite,” Jada said, coarsely. “It’s not going to be soft enough to work.”

“I was more concerned with durability.”

“For the final product, yes, but I will need a lot of time to do the work we had discussed. The metal will need to be shaped at a cooler temperature.”

“Lana, your thoughts?”

“That would depend on the work required,” Lana said. “What did you have in mind?”

“Engraving,” King Regon said. “It would be in an ancient root language to represent the joining of distant, relative nations. Jada has been working on translating it after my counsel and I crafted the message. Would the alloy work for that?”

“We would have to test it, but my inclination is that it wouldn’t,” Lana said. “Once it cools, amorite-steel becomes too hard to work with engraving tools. As I had explained in my letter, it will endure the trials of time, but it will be...difficult to do much detail work with.”

“Hmmm,” King Regon said. “Is it a question of cost or effort?”

“We could potentially work with amorite in its raw form, but once it binds with the steel, it becomes too challenging to shape without heating it to melting again. Perhaps a gold and paudnum alloy?”

“Too soft,” King Regon said. “It will be decorative, but I need something that will not tarnish or crumble in a strong grip over time.”

“What if we split the difference?” Jada said. “I could work the runes in gold and Lana can attach them to the steel-amorite staff.”

“Lana? Your thoughts?”

“It will take some time, but yes. I often use gold for filigree work, but it will be more... raised than etchings.”

“But that would possibly cause them to damage easily, yes? The runes, I mean.”

“There’s a technique from Abocath I’ve heard about,” Lana thought. “Rather than shaping the gold onto the staff, we shape the staff *around* the gold. We can craft the staff with space for the runes so that they’ll fit like a key into a lock. After that, the technique is used to set the gold into place, smoothing out the staff. The gold might lose some of its luster, but I’d be confident that it will work and shine with a bit of polish. It may take a few... experimental tries.”

“Experiment until it is perfect,” King Regon nodded. “I’ll approve whatever it takes to make the staff. I appreciate the two of you being so thorough. Where did you learn about metal craft so quickly, Jada?”

“I had an...introductory lesson last night. Lana has a great deal of knowledge to share.”

“Nice to see you can still be surprised,” King Regon chuckled. “Get to work. There is no shortage of tasks for you to complete.”

Jada took her loss graciously, but left Lana with a new challenge. The steel would be easy enough to find, but the amorite was expensive. And now there was the question of the new gold work that needed to be added. She’d want to take a few passes at that before applying anything to a final version of the staff, but there was a comfort in working with gold. The fact that it was easy to melt meant that it was easy to start over. Certainly easier than other metals.

“We’ll need enough steel for four staffs,” Lana explained as the mirror image of the king faded away. “And enough amorite for three. That’s the ratio I sent in the ingot for King Regon’s approval. I know a distributor, but it won’t be an easy order.”

“I’ll put in an order with the distributor,” Jada said. “With the king’s seal, we should have it by morning.”

“That much amorite would take a month for me to get on my own!”

“Perks of the king’s seal.”

“In that case, care for another lesson? I could walk you through the Abocathian technique as I try to learn it myself.”

“I...no, I have to get back to translating. The language we’re working in is difficult. I want to ensure the translation is accurate. This is going to be a legacy piece for the king, and I would hate for my legacy to become a grammatical error.”

“Of course. Feel free to stop in tomorrow morning when the metals arrive.”

“I will,” Jada said. She turned and paused at the top of the stairs. Looking back over her shoulder, Jada offered a gentle smile. “Thank you for your patience. My temper is...famously short, so I appreciate your kindness. Even when I don’t deserve it.”

“Everyone deserves kindness,” Lana smiled back. “We’ll start again tomorrow.”

Jada rushed down the staircase and Lana marked her exit with the closing of the front door shortly after.

Lana spent more time in her workshop crafting the last pieces of the special orders. She'd finished the breastplate the day before, and the pauldrons the day before that. There was some detail work to do on the helm, but Lana found the work enjoyable. After spending so much time fretting over the whims of kings and mages, it felt good to work with her hands in a craft that she considered herself an expert in.

## Chapter 8

When she was young, Jada accompanied her parents on a visit to a kingdom in the far west where the court kept a panther in a cage. The giant cat was taller than Jada was at the time, with gleaming white teeth, eyes like molten gold, and fur as black as a starless sky. The enclosure was decorated with plants, rocks for lounging, and a fountain that resembled a waterfall. Her parents were taken with the feline's beauty, but Jada had only been aware of its unease, pacing in circles and never resting for more than a few moments.

Jada felt like she was a panther in a cage of Darillic runes.

The language hadn't been spoken in over a thousand years, the runes long lost to time. They had been worn away from most of the monuments from the Darillic Period, leaving only smudged and half-legible shapes. Most mages these days preferred Redmark Runes or Adririan Runes, so Jada's course of study was far from common. For a long time, it seemed that the language would be forgotten and lost to myth.

Jada had been in her second year as the court mage when the tablet had been brought to her attention. Her uncle had called on her to inspect it, as if she had some authority. The uppermost lines were Adririan, the antiquated Fraudim was used to write the second passage, and a third language that made her blood chill. The stone tablet was remarkably well preserved. Jada was able to translate the Fraudim well enough to understand that it was the same as the passage above in Adririan. As soon as Jada understood, her sole task at the castle became deciphering the runes.

It was hardly a one-to-one translation. Even jumping from Adririan to Fraudim was a different grammatical structure, a change in some of the cultural syntax, not to mention an entirely different alphabet. The jump to Darillic would no doubt contain the same problems. It was a puzzle, and Jada hated the confusion it posed. She all but begged another mage to take it on, but no one dared disobey the king's order. Still, after two years of study, she had managed to pick apart enough of the language and she could properly understand a handful of symbols.

Once she had gotten that far, her uncle asked her to translate small passages into Darillic from Adririan. Piecing together a new sentence was far more challenging than dissecting an old language using two others as a guide. Jada had joked that she was better at breaking things apart than putting them back together, but this was truly driving her mad. The work

aggravated her, her eyes swimming with symbols and ancient letters that had no known sounds. She was more comfortable when it was a collection of random lines rather than a ghost of a language.

There were other scholars better suited for this task, but King Regon had chosen her. No doubt in large part due to Jada's mother. Jada longed to be back in the academy where things made sense: strict routine, equal burdens, and a common goal. In this new world of court, there was little like the academy. So much fell on her and every courtier had their intentions. It was simpler when she was the only one she had to think about.

To rest her eyes, Jada leaned back and took her coin out of her pocket. Lana had insisted that she make something as they went through the concepts of metalwork and smithing. She had chosen the silver, melted it out down in the forge flames, and cast the rough shape in a mold. She then hammered the coin flat and smooth, constantly working the edge into a perfect circle. When the final shape was done, Jada had used Lana's etching tools to mark two designs on opposite sides of her coin. Between Jada's perfectionism and Lana's encouragement, the coin took careful shape. The circle was small enough to sit comfortably over Jada's thumbnail, but it felt more valuable than any of the gold owls she'd given Lana this morning.

Language was study and books and staring at lines until Jada's eyes melted out of her skull. The metalwork was familiar in a way, mechanical and precise. There was more pride in that carefully hewn token than in any of the symbols on her slate board. Jada rubbed the smooth, flat surface of the coin. Her thumb felt the raised edges of her design: a circle broken by three lines on one side and her Adirian initials on the other. Jada soothed her rushing mind by turning the coin over and over again in her fingers.

###

The metal for King Regon's order came the following morning. Crates of metal ingots were unloaded by a pair of strong, adolescent brothers whom Lana paid a gold owl each for their work. Jada arrived as the boys finished stacking the last of the steel bricks and lingered by the door as the brothers walked back home.

"So, this is our staff?" Jada asked, running her fingers over the crate closest to her.

“It will be,” Lana said, putting her leather apron on. “We’ll have to make the alloy first. That will take some time, so we can start work on the mold. I also want to set aside a fairly long piece to practice that gold merging technique I was telling you—the king about.”

“You can call him my uncle, if you like,” Jada said. “I do when we’re in private.” Lana nodded a little. It felt more comfortable thinking of the man as someone’s uncle or father rather than the ruler of nations.

Lana spent hours in the forge, feeding bricks into the smelting pot. As imperfections bubbled to harden on the surface, she dutifully sifted them out, discarding the pieces aside. As the ingots simmered and melted, she worked with Jada to make the mold for the head and staff parts of their creation and a long, straight bar for practice. When the steel finished, she and Jada worked together to tilt the contents of the pot into their brick molds to settle. Jada was winded and sweating, slowly stripping off layers of her clothing as the forge burned behind them.

“For the letters,” Lana said, picking up a bar of gold worth a farmer’s yearly income, “we’re going to need another mold with the runes. Do you have them handy?”

“The runes...aren’t finished yet,” Jada said. “The exact context is still something being debated.”

“Alright,” Lana shrugged. “I guess we’ll just use Adririan for our practice.”

Jada worked another mold while Lana melted the gold in a smaller pot. Instead of shaping it with her hands, Jada used a slender, pointed stick to write out the letters of the Adririan alphabet. When it was finished, Lana poured the liquid gold into the shapes, careful not to overfill them, and let them cool.

“They’ll need time to set,” Lana said, dropping a fresh log on the fire. She’d pushed the low crackle to a furious roar with the foot billows today, and the wood was devoured faster than normal. “I’m going to get some food down at the inn. Care to join me?”

“I’ll take my lunch in my room, thank you,” Jada said, hurriedly snatching up her belongings. “I need to look over the runes again.”

Lana nodded and watched Jada rush out of the forge. It was far from friendship, but it wasn’t animosity or hate. Lana could live with distanced tolerance. Taking off the leather apron and washing her hands, Lana headed outside and walked down to the inn. She didn’t even see Jada’s silhouette.

## Chapter 9

Jada always woke up before the first light of morning. While she was habitually an early riser, her new routine here had made it a reluctant rising. At home, she would make a cup of tea, consider her to-do list, come up with a plan, and have a schedule plotted out before her second cup had finished steeping. With the blacksmith, Jada could only plan her day around the forge schedule. That left Jada with time to consider the runes over a single cup of tea before the rest of the town started to wake.

Ten runes. Ten words of Darillic and a single sentence of Adririan to translate. It was a maddening exercise in working backwards. Jada had even had to switch over to a higher caffeine brew.

Regarding the runes as words proved too challenging at times, so Jada considered the shape of the runes for patterns. Elegant in their way, Darillic was devoid of the harsh geometric constraints that made Adririan so clear. It seemed more like it was made of water than clear lines: letters swirling and spiraling back into new meanings. Apart from her ten runes, Jada's only other clue was the text page.

Almost eight thousand years ago, some intrepid hero had bound the words of Darillic to ink and paper. Before then, either no one had bothered writing them or they were unable to put them on something so plain as parchment. Still, a mage had done it, and that page had remained tucked away between the pages of a history book for Jada's current research. Another mage had found it and brought to Jada to help improve the understanding of the language with an emphasis on regular use.

The grammar was demanding to convert. The page was a passage of some sort, not only statements but questions and dialogue. Jada had wondered if it was some kind of play or story. If she could ever unlock Darillic, she would rewrite the tale in full. For now, she was able to fill in some of the blanks with an effort that made scholar mages bawk.

Defining the runes was getting harder as she found more words. The new page meant new words and new symbols that sometimes contradicted translations Jada thought she knew. It wasn't complex, but that made defining it even harder. Jada would stare at her pages for hours, trying to figure out the next rune, the next word, the next idea. It always came when she was fighting the urge to give up, the ten successes all representing very

near permanent failures. Darillic seemed to be toying with her, keeping her interested enough to string her along.

The morning cup of tea yielded no new secrets before the tolling of the morning bell. The people of the village started bustling about, the cows all calling out as the farmers began their daily chores. Jada set her teacup down and poured another before glancing out the window. Again, the blacksmith was walking through town and into the cemetery. Jada looked curiously out the window and peered through her spyglass. Lana knelt in front of a grave again, her back to Jada, and arranged some items on the ground. Jada took up her spyglass again and focused in on the items: a few sweets and a loaf of bread. It was the same grave with fresh offerings twice in a few days. That was more than Jada visited her own family.

Jada's musings were interrupted when she noticed Lana looking back at her down the length of the spyglass. The blacksmith's eyes were cold and piercing, seeking her out through the lenses. Jada pulled the spyglass away, but still felt Lana's eyes close on her. She ducked beneath the window and hid behind a stack of books, peering out over the spines. Lana had turned away and was heading back to the road. Jada dropped her shoulders and relaxed. She would have to be more careful.

After a light breakfast of her own, Jada walked outside to head over to the blacksmith's shop. The offering on the grave was still out, being picked over by mice and a few birds. A crow lingered by the grave and glared at Jada as she stared too long at the headstone. Turning away, Jada headed down the street, but the crow's call pursued as the bird fluttered from tree to tree. The crow didn't stop tormenting her until she was in the forge.

The blacksmith was already fueling the fires with wood, pressing down on the bellows with her full weight to stoke the flames high. It was already scorching hot inside after just a few hours, and the blacksmith had already taken off her heavy apron. At the pit of the fire, three ingots sat together in a large pan, starting to sweat their precious metals as the heat rose around them.

"Nice of you to join me," Lana said, pressing down on the bellows and issuing a belch of flame to the forge. "Grab some of that wood."

"I want to apologize," Jada said calmly. "For spying on you..."

"More wood to the flames..."

With as much closure as she felt she deserved, Jada started adding split logs to the flame, setting it crackling each time a bout of air surged the fire hotter. After a few more moments of the heat, Jada took off her jacket as Lana grabbed the pan of bubbling liquid with a set of tongs and swung it out over a bar mold. With an expert hand, she tilted the liquid metal into the mold, bubbles bursting from inside and sending droplets of glowing liquid out of the entry hole. When the pan was emptied, Lana set it back in the forge and started heating the next set of bricks.

Jada could only help raise the heat of the fire, bricks of metal being melted and reformed by Lana's hand. At the end of the process, they had filled the two staff pieces and one practice rod. Lana set down the heating pan and sat, pouring water from a canteen over her shoulders.

"Needs time to cool," Lana said gruffly. "The first one will be the purest, but the others will be usable."

"Whose grave is it?" Jada asked. "I know it's special to you, but why?"

"You don't know how to leave well enough alone, do you?"

"I've been told I'm...blunt."

Lana sighed and poured some water over her shoulders. "He was my husband."

"I didn't know you were married..."

"The forge was his before it was mine," Lana said, looking around. "I only made pretty gewgaws then—shiny trophies for men to offer women in hopes of catching her fancy: necklaces, rings, and even the odd diadem for the nobility. Jore didn't see my work as frivolous. He saw me for my hands, the skill of a crafter. Our courtship was...blunt, like ironwork. He sent me a flower he'd made out of scrap metal, and I sent him a flower of scrap gold and gems in return. Six months into sending each other these outlandish metal works, we finally started seeing each other as more than friends."

"If you don't mind my asking—"

"He died in war," Lana said with a harshness that made Jada recoil. "When he was conscripted, he asked me to make him a weapon. It was the first time I ever put hammer to steel to make something that was meant to cause harm. He had to guide me through the whole thing, and I asked him why he didn't just make it himself. Jore said that he wanted my

love bound in the layers of metal. He wanted me with him in the field of battle, protecting him.”

“And did it protect him?”

“Not well enough,” Lana said. “He named it Hammer Star. I thought it was silly—naming weapons—but he insisted on it. That sword protected my dear Jore from death more times than I may truly know. But the one time it didn’t? An arrow pierced his eye...”

“I’m sorry, that...that sounds awful.”

“There’s no pain quite like it,” Lana said. “I wanted to cause more pain to drown my own. I wasn’t allowed to fight, but I could make weapons. But unlike Hammer Star, I layered those weapons with hate and malice, rage and revenge. I wanted people to suffer like I had suffered. I wanted them to bury their loves, like I had buried my beloved Jore. And then...I was forced to confront that. Seeing people die with weapons I created? It felt like I was taking their lives with my own hands, but it left me feeling hollow. My heart was hurt and I couldn’t reforge it with anger. And all the blood in the world won’t heal a broken spirit.”

“Is that why you stopped making weapons?” Jada asked. “You didn’t want to hurt anyone like you’d been hurt by Jore’s loss?”

“I suppose,” Lana said, setting her forearms on her knees. Rocking gently, she looked deep into the burning fire as the logs from their smelting spree had started to die down. “You were a war mage?”

“Trained as one, yes.”

“Have you ever taken a life?”

“No,” Jada shook her head. “I’ve seen many die, but I was pulled from the front lines as soon as I was eligible to serve. My mother refused to allow me to fight, so my uncle chose me as his pet mage.”

“And you regret it? Not going to war?”

“I regret losing the choice. That’s all we are, isn’t it? Making the decisions that are given to us. My mother had tried to play every little facet of my life like she was a puppeteer. I don’t know how I would have felt about ending a life...or even having my own life in peril. But having that taken away from me? It felt like a part of me had been broken.”

“Why not deny the position?”

“It’s a great honor, only a fool would deny it. It’s not the position I strive for...barely a place I can do much good. But my friends I had trained with? They all had the choice to experience it.”

“Mmm...” Lana said, dully. She stared at the fire a little while longer. “I’ll be able to start working on the practice pieces soon. You won’t have to be here if you have other tasks to tend to.”

“I still need to make the runic markings. Can you afford to be without me for a few days?”

“I may prefer it.”

Hurt, Jada looked down and picked up her jacket from where it hung off the edge of the chair. “I’m...sorry for intruding on your privacy.”

“My husband’s death is nothing private...” Lana said, standing and going back to her forge. “I hope you understand the heart of my anger in time.”

## Chapter 10

The next few days were tedious for Jada. She would wake before the sun and pore over the single page of Darillic until well into the night, only pausing for a heel of bread and more tea. Stacks of plates and tea cups of various fullness littered the flat spaces: the desk, the floor, the windowsill, even parts of the bed. Jada never paid much attention to the remains of her meals. She was razor-focused on the slate in her room and the Darillic toyed with her.

Frustrated, Jada threw a book across her room, knocking a few other volumes from their place on the shelf. Exhausted, Jada slumped forward in her chair and pressed her face into her hands. She couldn't remember the last time she'd slept. Her dreams, once a respite, were now flooded with the strange symbols. Where someone else might dream of an endless corridor with a door that never gets closer, Jada dreamed of symbols on the cusp of her understanding. She was on the edge of falling asleep when a knock at the door roused her.

"I asked not to be disturbed!" Jada snapped. She leaned forward and pressed her face into her hands again. The intruder knocked again and Jada stormed over to the door. "What part of leave don't you under—?"

"I come in peace," Lana said, holding up a sweet roll. "With an apology."

"I'm sorry," Jada said, wiping a hand over her head to smooth her hair. "I had told the staff not to bother me. I've been...tightly wound, recently."

"I'm sorry I was so cold to you," Lana said, holding out the roll. It was golden brown with a pale yellow glaze that oozed down the sides. Jada took the gift and bit into it, as the lemony scent woke a hunger in her. She tore into the bread and the bright, citrus flavors danced across her tongue. Jada sat and only stopped eating when she noticed Lana staring.

"No, I shouldn't have spied on you," Jada shook her head. "And I shouldn't have pushed on an old wound. I can't imagine what you've been through and I'm sorry."

"I thought a long time about what you said," Lana said, "about wanting to fight and your choice. That should be your choice, you're right. I saw many people who didn't have a choice forced into fighting, but you want the best for the world. I shouldn't have spat at you for that. Jore was...a lot like you, honestly? He was a bit pig-headed and blunt, but he was also very dedicated to his cause—whatever that happened to be. You would have liked him. Or you would have tolerated each other equally."

"I still shouldn't have pressed like that. The loss still hurts you."

"It does," Lana said. "Most days I can move passed it...put my pain into the forge and let it create something beautiful. But even on the worst days, it shouldn't be something that I turn against a person."

"Looks like we both made some mistakes," Jada said, finishing the roll. "Thank you for breakfast."

"It's two in the afternoon..."

"Damn," Jada leaned her head back. "I can't even keep time straight anymore."

"This is the message you're working on?" Lana took a few steps towards the slate, but kept a respectful distance while peering back at Jada.

"Parts of it. It's an old language from before the rise of kingdoms and the division of men. My uncle chose it so that it would reinforce the idea of unity between nations. The problem is, it's so old that no one speaks, reads, or writes it anymore. The scraps we have are all lucky breaks and I'm meant to figure out the rest."

"That's asking a lot of you to translate an entire language."

"Well, not all of it. Enough to write the message my uncle asked for."

"But you have ten symbols?"

"After a year," Jada said, approaching her board. "It's frustrating. It's like the language doesn't want to be translated. Or like it's playing with me. Giving enough insight to get close, but never enough to see the words for what they are."

"Sounds exhausting," Lana said. "No wonder you feel so much pressure."

"If I could focus more or get the words I need and find them somewhere I could..." Jada trailed off, as if she didn't know what would happen after she found her magic codex. She sighed and shook her head.

"When I was an apprentice smith," Lana said, stepping closer to Jada. "One of our tests was to recreate a piece we'd seen from memory. We were only allowed a glance at it before we had to recreate it. For the jewelry makers guild, it was a necklace. It was frustrating because I would try to remember details and lose other parts of it in the process."

"So you understand. It's impossible."

“Unless you stop looking for the details,” Lana said. “I was so focused on getting the details that I lost sight of the whole. The message you’re looking for? Perhaps it’s closer than you think. You might be chasing them away.”

Jada chuckled a little. She considered the message as a whole: not the symbols but her uncle’s crisp handwriting. She focused on the way his rough hand had scratched the letters, imagining the tip of the quill dragging across the page. Her uncle’s message of unity was painstakingly worded. She could imagine him poring over the words to get the true spirit of the message without focusing too much on—

Launching herself out of the chair, Jada rushed to the slate and grabbed her chalk. Lana stumbled backwards and made room for Jada, letting the mage pounce on her inspiration like an agile cat. Jada scrawled out a few variations of the same symbol, repeating the curling lines over and over again until a pattern in their variation started to appear. Before long, there was a line of identical runes at the bottom. Jada stepped back, panting and dropped her chalk. “And that’s number eleven...”

“Is it always that sudden?” Lana asked.

“No, not like that. I tried to focus on the spirit of the word rather than the exactness of a definition. When I did, the symbol popped into my mind and I was able to fine-tune it into what is written there.”

“You quite literally jumped on it.”

“Perhaps,” Jada thought, ignoring the joke, “Darillic doesn’t want to be defined, but it wants to be understood. The nature of a rune rather than an exact meaning.”

“You talk about Darillic like it’s alive.”

“The more I research it, the more I feel it may be,” Jada smiled. “Would you...help me find more runes?”

“I could,” Lana said, “though first a proper meal to celebrate your eleventh rune? And maybe a bath?”

## Chapter 11

The message required nineteen runes. Once Jada had all of the runes together, she was able to apply the grammar to bind them into a single sentence. By the time the sun went down, Jada could have cried over the sentence.

The sentence was scrawled over a hundred times, fine-tuned by obsession and a need for perfection. Jada knew that the Darillic language may never again be so complete and she intended to savor it.

“What does it say?” Lana said, watching Jada scrawl the rune sequence for the hundredth time.

“By my hand, the world shall be as one, united in purpose and will.”

“It will look beautiful in gold. We’ll add it to the staff tomorrow.”

“We can’t add it now? It would be nice to have it somewhere more permanent...”

“It won’t fly off your chalkboard in the middle of the night. If that’s your fear, why not write it down and keep it safe?”

“Yes,” Jada nodded, transcribing the sentence into a notebook. It wasn’t until she was squinting at the paper that she realized how dark it was. “How late is it?”

“Long after the evening bell. Perhaps midnight?”

“It feels like barely any time has gone by.” Even as Jada said this, her eyelids got heavy and felt thick with sleep. She staggered a few feet to the bed and collapsed onto the mattress between open books. Dutifully, Lana set the books on the floor, leaving them open to their respective pages.

“When you wake tomorrow,” Lana said, moving towards the door. “Find me at the forge. We will have work to do.” If Lana said anything else, it was lost to Jada’s sudden exhaustion. She half grumbled a response before rolling herself into the blankets.

Her dreams had once been filled with fleeting visions of the Darillic Runes. Now she stood in the center as her sentence spiraled around her in a steady orbit. In her dream, she raised a hand and the ring rose at an angle, cutting through the air faster until the entire area was aglow with her sentence. It was spinning so fast that it blurred, but somehow Jada could make out each rune. Then, like stars appearing in twilight, more runes appeared and Jada knew their meanings. It wasn’t flowery words of a special script, but ancient words that held power.

Jada woke several times in the night to draw more of the runes on the paper strewn about her bed. She would flop off one edge of the mattress, write down the new rune and ungracefully return to bed. Sometimes, the runes ended up in the margins of her historical texts rather than notebooks, but she was desperate to write them down. After a time, she had ended up asleep on the floor with a blanket over her. That was how she woke the following morning with ten additional runes written throughout her research.

It felt as if the floodgates had opened. In the light of day, Jada was able to visualize her dream runes. It startled her that none of the runes appeared on her single sheet of Darillic. Taking her morning tea, Jada numbly looked over her new runes. If the runes were alive, she had assumed it would be like a companion animal, such as a dog or a falcon. Now, with the fits of her dream runes, she wondered if Darillic was an ancient predator that was hungry for a mind. She read the Darillic sentence again and picked up the pristine paper it had been written on. She left her room and the books scattered as they were. It would be best to take what she needed from the Darillic Beast and let it go.

###

Lana was chipper when Jada walked into the shop. She was carving a mold for their staff and looked up when Jada approached. Her smile was gentle, but there was a hint of worry behind it. Jada returned the smile, but even she wasn't sure about the confidence she tried to create.

"This is going to be a little challenging," Lana said, jumping into the problem. "I'll let you decide: Do you want to cast the runes individually or as a single piece?"

"A single piece," Jada said, with a sureness that surprised her. "After all the work I did to make them into a sentence, it feels like they want to remain together."

"Understood," Lana said. It was a statement without judgment or scorn. Lana wasn't sure what Jada meant, but she could tell that Jada needed that truth to ring true. She accepted—understood—because Jada asked her to.

The pair worked in sand first. Jada's hand shook as she tried to write out the Darillic backwards, as if somehow the very act of reversing these runes was unnatural. The message of hope was twisted and warped into an unknowable curse. No sooner had she finished than Jada dashed the sand away, the cursed sentence hurting her. Lana's rough hands touched her shoulders as Jada trembled, but she relaxed.

“I’m sorry...” Jada croaked out. “But that won’t work...”

“What if we did the sentence the correct way,” Lana said, “and then filled it all in at the same time?”

“That would feel better,” Jada nodded. “Something about writing backwards felt wrong.”

“You don’t need to explain.”

Together, they made the first cast of their sentence in gold. After it had some time to cool, Jada was able to shape the gold further into the crisp lines of her runes. This act felt better, almost nurturing. She kept the meaning of each word in her mind as she worked, forcing all her understanding and knowledge of the rune into each one. The runes went from depictions to the physical essence of a thing that Jada could hold in her hands. When the nineteen were complete, they prepared the mold of the staff.

“This is where the technique gets a little more challenging,” Lana said. “We’re going to make clay copies of the gold runes; those will go into the mold and create reliefs for the gold pieces to fit. We’ll clear off the crumbling clay afterward, but in its place will be slots for our gold pieces. Then, we use the smelting techniques from Abocath to bind them in place.”

Jada watched as Lana pressed the gold pieces into wet sand and filled them in with moist clay. When the pieces hardened enough, Lana pressed the pieces into the firm mold, holding them in place with tree sap. Closing the lid, Lana moved the chute to the mouth of the mold, preparing the opening for the molten metal.

Back at the bellows, Jada heated the metal while Lana tossed in more fuel. Occasionally, Lana would stop to check the consistency of the bubbling metal and skim off the top layer of impurities until a sheen of liquid metal remained. At Lana’s command, Jada grabbed a handful of chains and they heaved together, pouring the first batch into the mold. Dark grey metal veined with black spilled down the chute, rolling like a wave crashing against the cliff faces. The metal oozed into the mold until it sizzled and popped, trying to force the air out of every pocket in the mold. “Now we wait...” Lana said. “And see if we’ve made something worth creating...”

After an hour, Lana and Jada undid the latches holding the halves together. The clay holdings for the runes had been destroyed, leaving warped versions of the runes in their

place. They made the staff look ugly and rotten, like an old tree branch rather than a work of fine metal. Jada looked away, disappointed.

“Don’t worry,” Lana told her, setting a hand on the young mage’s shoulder, “that’s the beauty of working with metal. We can always try again...”

## Chapter 12

Lana had wondered if they should stop trying at attempt seven. The clay molds were not strong enough to resist the heat of the alloy, always creating unbearable air pockets that would cause the staff to warp and collapse on itself. Once it had cooled and hardened, they would drop it back into the cauldron to be melted down again, sometimes adding a fresh ingot to maintain the purity of the material.

“Your runes, it would seem, don’t like imitations,” Lana said, sitting at her jeweler’s desk with a mug full of water. “They would rather be destroyed than suffer the indignity of a negative space.”

“Nature abhors a vacuum,” Jada shrugged. “It’s a cardinal rule of magic that a void will want to be filled. For whatever reason, these runes want to destroy the empty spaces they would leave when the clay is destroyed.”

“Can you ask them not to?”

“Mages can’t defy the elements. Null is a more powerful element than anything I could conjure with Adriran runes. They’re too young to defy such ancient forces.”

“Air pockets in the metal will weaken the staff. If we can’t properly cast the empty spaces, even the finest smelting tricks will leave an opening for decay from within.”

“If clay doesn’t work, could we use a different metal?”

“The staff would bond to it and we’d never get them out. The good thing about the clay is that it becomes brittle and removes itself, leaving us with a nice, tight seal. We could use a lighter metal, I suppose, but it would be too likely to bind with minute pieces and leave us with a poor fit for your runes.”

“What if...what if I could protect the gold? Let the metal bond with the gold directly.”

“Protect the gold? It will melt at a much cooler temperature than the alloy we made. They’ll be mangled and ruin the staff. We’d have to start completely from scratch and it would waste materials.”

“I can cast them in a magic spell to protect them from fire,” Jada said, already making the sigil.

“I thought mages couldn’t defy the elements?”

“I...I don’t know how, but I see a way. A Darillic rune came to me and I think I can use it to protect these gold pieces from melting.”

“Magic and metal work? It’s not something I’ve tried before. The two have never really been companion studies for a reason.”

“If I’m wrong, I’ll remake the pieces myself.”

Lana nodded, a little uneasy, and handed the gold runes over to Jada. She arranged them neatly in the Spell Wheel she created—not in their true order, Lana knew, but in a way that wasn’t wholly unnatural and offensive. With a piece of chalk, she wrote a symbol in Darillic, flowing and airy compared to the strict, straight lines of Adriran. Jada breathed life into the spell with a word of old power, making the runic circle flare up like the forge with the bellows pressed. The chalk run burned, fading away into nothing while leaving the gold pieces untouched. Jada moved the Darillic runes slowly to the molding station.

They held the gold runes in place with small pieces of tree sap against the mold, a line of glittering text about as long as Lana’s forearm in the body of the staff. The line of text flowed from below the grip, facing outward towards whoever was looking at the wielder of the staff. Jada seemed satisfied with their arrangement and nodded to Lana. Together, they closed the two halves of the mold, like undertakers preparing a coffin.

The bellows roared again, Jada putting all of her weight into each press of the handle. The flames leaped up higher as Lana alternated between churning their latest failure and feeding more wood into the fire. Lana dropped another Amorite brick into the boiling pot, glowing red hot as it blended into the molten liquid. Layers of imperfections came off, leaving Lana with a boiling pot of perfectly pure metal. Lana didn’t believe much in magic, but she put her own intention into the staff as well, chanting a mantra in her mind as she worked.

When the glowing metal was ready, Lana and Jada pulled down on the chains, knowing the timing without speaking it. The metal rolled down the chute with a magma-like consistency that rolled over itself to get down to the opening at the top of the staff. The metal poured in through a spigot barely wider than two of Lana’s fingers, molten metal popped and roiled within the mold, filling each open space and building layers of alloy in the box. When the last of the metal had been poured in, bubbling over the minute opening, Lana sat at her work station without a word. Jada joined her.

Neither of them spoke, as if breaking the silence of the workshop would somehow damn the speaker. The metal crackled and hissed as it formed into the mold. It bubbled far longer

than Lana would have liked. As the last of the bubbles stopped and the metal hardened, the workshop went silent.

The crack of the mold splitting made Lana jump for cover, as if pieces of shrapnel would burst from the box if she didn't hide. The mold was split along the two faces, not where the latches had held them. Lana shook her head and sighed. "Too much stress on the mold," Lana cursed. "We'll have to remake the runes in gold."

"We'll need to remake the master mold, too, huh?"

"It was worth trying," Lana said, but it felt like a lie. "Come on, let's get to work on the new mold."

Working the mold felt like a calming break after all the attempts with the staff and the runes. This, Lana knew, would work. No magic or trickery. Just a simple metalworking technique. She lined both halves of the mold with loose sand and worked it into shape to Jada's exact specifications. Jada was quiet, but Lana felt she was pensive rather than disappointed. "I thought I had the spell right," Jada said, shaking her head. "It looked right when it cast it."

"It was just a thought, right? You'd never actually seen those runes before."

"I have, though. In my dreams..."

"That's not the same thing. I had a dream that I had a bear living in my bedroom..."

"It wasn't like that. I was in control of the dream. I could sense it. I don't understand what went wrong."

"A problem for your mind to puzzle out," Lana said. "Maybe something to keep you busy while I try to solve our relief problem. We'll try to tackle it again tomorrow. Let's clean up for now."

Jada rolled up her sleeves and started collecting the detritus from their failed mold. Together, they replaced the sand from their failed mold into the mixing bin, ready for the next project. Lana's fingers touched something hard and she furrowed her brow.

"The staff survived?" Lana wondered aloud, lifting the rod out of the sand. It was a solid piece and rather handsome. The way the metal was veined gave it a marbled look, though it was incredibly smooth. Jada reached out and took the staff, staring at the front face. Lana joined her.

The gold runes were on the front face of the staff, perfectly fit and locked into the sentence that the king had chosen. Amazed, Lana ran her fingers over the runes to find that it was perfectly flush. The gold had become part of the metal around it, a fine knit that bound the very essence of the two metals together while maintaining the shape of each golden rune. It seemed to glow with reflections in the firelight.

“Congratulations,” Lana said, putting a hand on Jada’s shoulder. “You just broke magic and metal...”

## Chapter 13

Lana polished the staff, gingerly touching it with the cloth as though a wrong move would destroy all the work. While Jada used the mirror to contact her uncle, she applied more layers of wax. The blacksmith used finer grits of smoothing paper and smaller, more precise movements until she was polishing each individual inch with a piece of silk. The hammer face was heavy, but it was a reassuring pressure in Lana's hands.

"Is this what it feels like?" Jada asked, coming down the stairs. "To create something so perfect?"

"If it is, I've never felt it," Lana shook her head, handing the staff to Jada. She sat in her chair and folded her hands together. "This is probably closer to the feeling of giving birth!"

"Regardless, my uncle will be pleased. He's sending an escort tomorrow to take it back."

"And you?"

"I suppose I'll travel with it. This is my life's work, after all. Or rather, our life's work."

"There's more to life than work, but I'm happy you take such pride in it."

"What will you do afterwards?"

"Find the next inspiration. Make something else new and try to find a place in the world for it."

"No greater aspirations? We made a staff using runes forgotten for thousands of years."

"Runes you found and runes you crafted. My work will continue as it always has. I do feel inspired now. The king's staff will become a fashion trend amongst the nobility. Nothing to rival his majesty's staff, but there will be a demand for ornate staffs and I'm already thinking of new designs. Different metals will make the merging technique easier. I can see it already: snakes, roses, birds..."

"You can go back to how things were before?"

"I didn't unravel the secrets of Darillic," Lana said. She leaned back and smiled. "And you?"

"I suppose I'll search for more Darillic," Jada shrugged. "Now that I've gotten the hang of finding runes, I could unlock more with some time and practice."

"Is that what you want to do?"

“What I want to do? That’s a question I haven’t asked myself in a while. I suppose it would be, but now that there are no wars to fight? I can use Darillic to help people. Not just string it together into pretty-looking sentences, but really harness their power.”

“You think these are also magic runes?”

“The runes I used in that spell were Darillic. I can...tap into something more powerful than standard Adririan runes with Darillic. I don’t understand it yet, but I will with time.”

“Hmmm...makes me wonder what other mysteries you may yet unlock. I, for one, would like to get some sleep. How about you?”

“I’ll stay awake a little while yet,” Jada said, cradling the staff gently. “I’ll probably be up all night fretting over the staff if I let it out of my sight.”

“Try not to stay up too late,” Lana smiled, putting a gentle hand on Jada’s shoulder. “Tomorrow, you have to make sure the staff gets to where it belongs.”

Jada nodded and regarded the staff as Lana’s footsteps trudged up the stairway. She gripped the staff tightly, but her fingers gently traced the runes. They felt like they radiated magic. Jada had cast many spells in the past: communicating over long distances, raising heavy crates off of carts with a wave of her hand, even controlling the curve of a blade thrown through the air. But the magic she had done today could change how mages viewed magic in the first place. Darillic, if used well, could unlock a whole new compendium of spells. It would be enough to keep her busy for years to come.

The thought made her a little sad. She had grown fond of the way things were going, though she could barely admit it. Her new routine away from the castle was starting to become second nature. Yet, she also longed for her position at home and the power that came with it. She had all the books of Adrira in the castle study, but part of her had grown fond of this place. Her head told her that she needed to get back to work, but the staff in her hand made her question what the work was now. She wanted to create more things—more spells—but working for her uncle, she didn’t know how much more she’d be able to create.

The weight of the staff in her hands was something firm she could hold to keep a grasp on reality. There would be time to consider the future when the staff was in her uncle’s hands. And there would still be a lot of work for her to do at the castle. For tonight, Jada basked in the pride of her accomplishment. Warmed by that feeling, Jada looked into the fire long after it had been reduced to nothing but embers.

###

Lord Devron arrived with his fine carriage and two much larger wagons. A trio of servants would stay behind to pack Jada's things (per very specific instructions) and Jada would be in charge of bringing the staff home. The treasure was shrouded in layers of silk, then cotton, then burlap. The wooden box had been bought from a family of four who had used it as a communal chest, but Jada stuffed it full of more padding to carry the staff onwards. The chest was then bound to the cart with chains and locks, then covered with a heavy tarp. All in all, Lana guessed that the staff was safe enough to fall off a cliff without getting a single scratch on the metal.

Lana watched the affair with interest, along with most of the town, there to watch the staff begin its journey to the castle. There wasn't the usual fanfare of royal ceremony: no military parade or great speeches. The real celebration would be at the castle when King Regon accepted the staff and presented it to the kingdom. Lana's village did the best they could, but it ended up being a group of locals standing around and staring while the staff was loaded onto the cart. Lord Devron accepted the crowd with charismatic grace and praised the town's modest hospitality.

"I don't think there will ever be a finer reception for a traveling party than this!" Lord Devron said, ripping off bits of a sweet roll and putting them in his mouth. "I hope the town's people will grasp the importance of this day."

"For some, this will just be another day," Lana said. "It's the future that will make us proud."

"Pride in you, I should hope."

"I don't need their pride. If his Majesty's peace is truly achieved, then I will be satisfied."

"The kingdom will be at peace; that we can promise. You will, of course, be invited to the great unveiling?"

"When the time comes," Lana said. "But I'm not one for parades and grand displays. I'll accept a simple applause and a glass of wine."

"Very well, then I'll accept the ovations on your behalf."

"Jada deserves the acclaim. I made the staff, but she was the one who unlocked Darillic."

"She will have her accolades as well."

Lana smiled gently and watched Jada. She was fretting over each step of the loading process, answering questions with terse, single-syllable answers. She checked each chain and the locks as she circled around the wagon a few times. The guards surrounding it on horseback watched silently, more interested in monitoring the wagon than watching the crowd. Still, Lana felt the staff was safe. Another hour and the procession was ready to leave.

Jada stopped in front of the smithy and looked at Lana with a hint of a smile. “Thank you,” Jada said. “This wouldn’t have been possible without—”

“Either of us,” Lana finished. “Don’t forget that.”

“I look forward to seeing you again at the unveiling. Goodbye, Lana.”

“My husband,” Lana said, pausing to wet her lips. “Didn’t believe in saying goodbye. He thought it was too permanent. He would only say one thing at partings: until our hearts touch again.”

Lana raised a hand, her palm flat and facing Jada. Jada bowed her head and pressed her hand to Lana’s. She smiled a little and turned back to the caravan. She got into the carriage with Lord Devron as he bid the crowd farewell with bravado. The caravan rolled out, two guards flanking the package on either side and three more holding the rear. The crowd cheered and clapped as the parade went by.

As the procession faded off into the distance, Lana leaned against the doorway of her forge with her arms crossed. A few town officials congratulated her, but Lana kept her pride quiet. Back in the forge, she was alone again. She flexed her hands as she went over to her anvil. Picking up her hammer again, Lana prepared for her next project. The mold from the staff was still in the corner, broken into two halves. She didn’t know what to do with it yet, so it stayed in the corner. While Lana didn’t look towards it, she felt its presence as she started her next project. The specter of the staff was now a permanent fixture in her workshop.

## Chapter 14

“Welcome home, Jada,” King Regon smiled warmly as the mage approached. The staff had been removed from the wagon and excavated from the collection of fabrics. Jada had left it wrapped in the silk as she personally brought it to the king’s salon, the large, round table cleared away. With nothing more than a gentle nod, Jada unwrapped the staff before her uncle.

King Regon smiled broadly and reached out, gently tracing the runes on the shaft and resting his hand above it. He lifted the staff off the table, perfectly balanced in his palm. Putting the tip on the wooden floor, King Regon looked up and down the length of the staff. It fit his height perfectly, the head of the staff at his eye level. He smiled broadly and looked between Jada and the runes. “You’re certain this is correct? The runes are as we discussed?”

“I’ve never been more sure,” Jada nodded. She felt a pang of possessive anger as her uncle held the staff, her Darillic sentence just beneath his grasp.

“This is a great gift,” King Regon said. “Your parents will be proud of your contribution. And you’ll be valued as one of the greatest mages of your time.”

“To serve the crown is my only wish,” Jada bowed her head. “I would like to work more with Darillic. I think there is something to it, yet...”

“In time,” King Regon said, using the staff as a walking stick. Each step he took was punctuated by the loud thud of the staff against the wooden floors. “We’ll discuss what your next duties will be when have revealed the staff.”

“But Darillic is...different than I expected,” Jada asked. “I think it’s a language of power... more than we expected.”

“It will be taken into consideration,” King Regon said, a bit firmer. “For now, we have to show the world our power. This staff, our empire, world peace...it’s all connected. It’s all that matters.”

Jada wanted to say more, but there was a shift in her uncle’s tone that she didn’t like. She bowed her head and King Regon left the salon with his staff. Jada wanted to follow the staff, but her uncle’s sternness scared her off. Jada took a low breath and turned, heading back to her quarters in her tower. The house staff was going about their duties and already whispers of the Court Mage’s return were circulating. Jada walked up a set of spiral stairs and went to her old room, the bed and armoire untouched. Apart from the things still at the

inn, Jada's room had been left undisturbed. Entering her study, Jada took out the notebook she'd brought back with her and approached her slate.

The new runes were arranged on the board and Jada wrote their 'understandings' next to them. She was reluctant to call them definitions, too afraid of scaring the Darillic understanding off if she tried to make them something too concrete. She had filled half the board before she heard a door open. "Forgive me for intruding," a voice whispered, "but I wanted to welcome you back myself."

Jada turned and bowed to the man. He was another of the mages who frequented court, though not in direct employ of King Regon. A great number of mages and simple nobles managed to make themselves quite at home to the king's hospitality. Master Hyrion was among them, a slender wisp of a person with a beard that looked like a strained cloud scattering to the breeze.

"Master Hyrion," Jada said. "It's good to see you still well."

"Quite well, my dear, quite well. I had heard many tales about your journey and the king's great creation. Quite remarkable, isn't it? Bringing an extinct language back from the brink of disappearing? Truly, you will be praised as a mage of our times!"

"Luck and timing are to praise, not me. I was given the tools and I'm sure—"

"These runes," Master Hyrion said, closing in on the slate and pushing Jada aside. "Are these the ones you used in the sentence?"

"With some study, I've been able to discern more runes. They have patterns with them, you see? A kind of natural evolution from one word to the next. Other times, the runes simply come to me, unbidden."

"Really? You can summon Darillic runes?"

"Well, it's less of a summoning, more of an accepting."

"I think that you and I should collaborate on this," Master Hyrion said. "I have some more complex sentences that I think would lend themselves well to Darillic. My own research looks like the scribblings of a child. Perhaps you could teach me some of your runes?"

Anxiety prickled in the pit of Jada's stomach. Master Hyrion had once called her arrogant and foolish, but she had expected some flattery from former antagonists. This felt different. He wasn't just trying to make a name for himself by being her ally. He had pursued

Darillic with the same tools, but Darillic shied away from his hand. She had an impression that his intentions were not for peace and unity and he certainly lacked the patience to let runes find him. Jada trusted her language more than another mage at this point, so she didn't trust him with it either.

"I would, but much is required of me in the moment: the presentation of the staff, the reception, I'm supposed to give a whole speech and all the pomp and circumstance. Perhaps, once I've settled back into my routine we can revisit this."

"Of course, no intention to pressure you, my dear," Master Hyrion smiled and set a hand on Jada's shoulder. Jada resisted the urge to turn away from his grasp. "When you find yourself with some time, I'd be happy to take some lessons from you."

"We will discuss it later," Jada smiled. "Thank you for stopping by."

"I'll see myself out," Master Hyrion said. His smile faltered a little and turned into a more honest scowl. Jada preferred that. At least he was being honest now. She listened to his shuffling feet until the door closed behind the master. Flush with concern, Jada moved across her apartment and bolted the door shut.

— — —

Jada's investigation was kept small. It wasn't that she didn't want to ask for help, but there was too much going on for her to find someone who could. Once the staff was in King Regon's hands, the reveal took front and center in everyone's mind. Celebrations were planned, dignitaries were invited, and Jada was given her own duties to keep her busy. She was required to make remarks at the ceremony, despite her resistance to the idea. Jada had spoken with her uncle several times about her future work, but it was quickly dismissed for other concerns.

The day of the ceremony finally came, thousands of officials in finery lined the king's hall as he stood at the throne with his staff. Lana had expressed gratitude in a letter, but confided in Jada that she preferred obscurity to celebrity. Jada understood, but had no reason to bow out of the celebration. Blacksmiths weren't known for speeches, but as the Court Mage, she was required to say something.

Each time a new face came in, they were required to walk up to throne, take the knee and kiss the head of the staff. Those in his own court did it with humility and pride, but Jada noticed a distinct resistance from others. The King of Chero, a proud man with wide set

shoulders, walked up with enough ease but resisted to take the knee. King Regon held out the end of his staff and glared. The King of Chero slowly extended his neck and kissed the end of the staff. Jada caught the anger and disgust in his eyes, but he didn't act on it. Even as he walked away, he scowled all the way back to his seat.

In her uncle, Jada only saw pride. Not just in the staff, but in the power it gave him. He smiled, not sitting until the entire chamber was filled. He spoke slowly and with gravity, but it didn't sound like Jada's uncle. King Regon sounded harsh, not like the man who would greet Jada with open arms. His speech was about the unity of all kingdoms, but there was a threat to it. It was more venomous than a hope, it was a command. King Regon didn't just want all nations joined under his rule, he demanded it. Jada gave her own words as was required of her station. Even without looking, she could feel that all eyes and attention weren't on her, but only looking at the staff. She was an accessory to her own creation.

The reception that followed gave everyone a chance to look at the staff up close. There were refreshments, but King Regon ate and drank nothing. He spoke with the dignitaries and his officers, a surety in his voice that put Jada on edge.

"This will be a time of peace to be sure," King Regon beamed. "We are entering a new era of unity. No longer will it just be the Kingdom of Adria, but the Adririan Alliance."

"I've heard that Lorai has chosen to join the Alliance as well," a white-bearded representative of the navy said. "But there are still the matter of pirates on their shores. They have no nationality, but we can round them up easily within a month."

"Either they join our Alliance or we'll sink their boats."

"An odd decision," Jada spoke up, "especially given our new era of peace."

"Peace is achieved by those willing to take it," King Regon said, glaring at Jada.

"We have all nations in our Alliance. Does it matter if there are few pirates off the coast of a few nations?"

"It's not just the pirates. There are rebels in the jungles, small outposts that claim no nationality, even deep jungle tribes that haven't made contact with the outside world. For peace to be absolute, it requires complete unity."

The gathered nobility nodded eagerly and the naval officer looked like a hungry wolf. Jada excused herself from the conversation and walked through the assembled court. There was a facade of joy and unity, but there was fear behind it. It was a terse celebration, as if

everyone were performing a play under the threat of death. Jada had never considered herself one to read the energy of a room well, but the court was bristling.

Up in her study, Jada sat at her desk and looked over the written version of the sentence in Darillic. After tonight's reception, the sentence felt different now. It had once filled her with pride, but now it felt less like an accomplishment and more like an unusual trap. She wanted to talk with her uncle, but he'd seemed changed since she came back. There was no other mage she trusted, especially since Master Hyrion had taken such an interest in the Darillic. Too many nobles would seek favors in exchange for aiding the Court Mage, not that any of them would be worth talking to. Only one person came to mind to look to for help.

## Chapter 15

Lana now had four different orders for staffs at work in her forge. As she'd predicted, the lords all tried to outdo one another, but no one dared try to outdo the king. Many of them were made of gold or silver with jewels that were big enough to buy entire houses in Lana's village. While many had asked for it, Lana refused to try to add the golden runes again. She doubted that she could reproduce Jada's enchantments, but she also felt uneasy about the rejection of nature.

The staff Lana was working on required some delicate lattice work to hold a massive ruby, like a red chicken's egg in a fishing net of gold. Sitting at her work bench, Lana toyed with her jeweler's tools, carefully twisting the golden wire into the desired shape, scrutinizing it under a magnified eye from the lens honed in on her work. Despite her focus, Lana still picked up the noise of someone knocking gently on her door.

Grabbing a hammer, Lana approached the door. The concern of the jewels being stolen had her working late into the night to avoid any opportunistic prowlers. While she had considered spending the king's money on extra security, she doubted that any competent thief would try to steal from her when the eyes of the kingdom were watching for her well-being. Not to mention, any thief foolish enough to try would suffer at the blunt end of Lana's hammer.

Poised by the door, Lana pressed against the doorframe. "Who's there?"

"It's Jada Rommen," a timid voice replied. "The King's Mage?"

Lana lowered her hammer and undid the lock. Jada was wrapped in a dark cloak with only a glittering stone in a lantern to guide her. "Jada? What brings you back into town? Come in! It's pitch black out there!"

"Thank you," Jada said. "I'm sorry if my timing is poor."

"I was awake," Lana smiled. "There is no such thing as poor timing for a busy smith. What are you doing here? I thought that your servants had brought all your things back to the castle..."

"They did," Jada said. She pulled back her hood and took out a piece of chalk. She raised a finger to her lips and scrawled a rune on each of the four walls of Lana's home. With a word, the runes all flared up and Lana felt a change of pressure in the room. "I apologize for all the mystery, but I needed to talk to someone I could trust."

“What’s wrong?”

“Ever since he took up the staff, my uncle seems different. He seems strangely resolute and uncommonly focused. I’ve tried speaking with him, but he seems beyond reason.”

“He’s only excited. The staff represents—”

“He has people bowing to him and kissing the staff. He’s talking about executing pirates and small revolutionary villages. There was a time when we were talking about peace, but this is has become a threat of fear.”

“And you think it is the staff?”

“Not entirely. What do you know about Darillic?”

“Only what you told me,” Lana shrugged. “It’s an ancient language, older than the nations. I’m guessing it has some elements of a language of power...beyond what we’re capable of.”

“I think it’s more than that. Darillic—I fear—isn’t just a language. It’s *the* language. There’s an old story about the first humans, do you know it?”

“The short version? Magic breathed life into humans and gave them the tools to create society. There’s stories of a magical hammer and a basket of eternal nourishment.”

“And another tool that magic gave them was language. I think Darillic is that language.”

“How did that lead to your uncle’s...madness?”

“Darillic isn’t just a way to describe a thing. It’s the very essence of the thing. It’s not just a sound to describe ‘heat’ or ‘water’ but it is the sound that names the thing and gives it meaning. Not just physical things, but the bigger abstract ideas.”

“And you think that sentence we wrote in the staff has corrupted him?”

“I don’t know,” Jada shook her head, “but I keep thinking about the exact wording of the sentence: By my hand, the world shall be as one, united in purpose and will. What if we accidentally, or perhaps intentionally, gave him the power to bend the will of others?”

“You think your magic could do that?”

“You saw what my magic could do. I saw the King of Chero bend to one knee and kiss my uncle’s staff as some sign of fealty. I could see he didn’t want to do it—more than just not wanting, but actively despising himself for doing it. There are tales of him cutting off the hand of a man who demanded he kiss it.”

“Maybe he’s gained more clarity and maturity with time?”

“There’s other things. Another mage approached me about teaching him Darillic. He knows that it’s a powerful language and I haven’t discussed it with anyone yet.”

“And you think they’re connected?”

“Perhaps, but if I’m right, the staff could just be the beginning. What if someone found the Darillic word for death? Or life? I proved that Darillic can defy the known laws of magic here with you. What if I helped someone do something terrible?”

“If you say that your uncle has been corrupted by the staff, why come to me?”

“I need your help to destroy it.”

Lana took a deep breath and sat down, taking a long drink of water and staring into the flames. “You want to destroy it? The Staff of King Regon?”

“That’s not King Regon,” Jada shook her head. “Not anymore.”

“And you think he’ll just...let us take it from him?”

“No. So we have to steal it.”

“Let’s get this straight,” Lana said. “We’re talking about theft at best and treason at worst.”

“We created the staff, it’s up to us to destroy it. If we don’t, I worry about what the corruption will do to my uncle. His peace will be tyranny and I can’t stand by, especially when it’s something I created.”

“Why come to me? Why not another mage or some other blacksmith in the castle?”

“Because they wouldn’t understand. You made the decision a while ago to no longer make any weapons. I know that you’re responsible enough to want to do the right thing.”

Lana took a deep breath and took a seat in her chair. “What did you have in mind? We won’t be able to just...break it.”

“We melt it down again.”

Lana dropped her head back and looked up at the ceiling. “OK...”

“OK?”

“You know the most about Darillic of anyone in Adrira, probably the world. If you think a tool we made is hurting people, then our responsibility is to destroy it. I don’t need to understand why because I’m trusting you.”

“How soon until you can come to the castle?”

“Another four days, at least,” Lana said, looking at the staff at her workbench. “I need to finish these other requests first and leaving projects unfinished is out of character for me.”

“I’ll send a summons the day after tomorrow,” Jada said, putting her hood back up. “It will give me time to figure out a way to separate the staff from the king.”

“I’m assuming asking politely won’t do the trick?”

“Afraid not,” Jada said. She took a small mirror out of her pocket and held it out to Lana. “This will let us speak together without being overheard. I’ll reach out to you if anything changes, for better or worse.”

“Is there anyone else we can trust?”

“I would doubt it. A time may come when we find others, but for now? Assume we’re on our own.”

## Chapter 16

Jada had very little training in espionage. Her training as a battle mage required mostly spell work and battle formations with her squad mates. There were mages trained for espionage, but Jada hadn't attended those classes. Now, she'd wished she was more experienced with tailing a target.

The first issue that came up was that Jada was well known around the castle. Despite her solitary nature, the castle staff still knew her, if only as a warning to stay out of her way. There was no amount of disguising she could do that didn't just end up looking like herself in a costume. Appearing as anything other than herself would draw too much attention.

Appearing as herself, Jada found her second problem was following King Regon. He was constantly surrounded by counselors, military officers, and relentless bootlickers. It was easy to follow him from a distance, but Jada could never listen to what he was saying to his crowd. The solution for that was magic. She gifted a pin to one of the nobles and kept a copy close to her ear. Without her own magic, the young duchess wouldn't know any better, but a mage might be able to pick up on the magical energy. Still, it allowed her to listen when the duchess was close to him and she was constantly hanging on her husband's arm.

Jada's third problem was identifying the king's patterns and habits. The staff was always in the same room as him, if not in his grasp. He kept a tight grip on it, locking it in the royal chambers with him and his wife at night. Jada knew the mages had crafted the lock and wove magic into it. Even if she knew how to pick locks, Jada doubted that she could unlock the bedroom before her uncle would be out of bed with the staff in his hand—if not his sword.

Two days after her visit to Lana, Jada watched courtyard where King Regon held an audience with his court. Sitting on a bench up in the high balcony, Jada pretended to flip through the pages of a book, though her focus was in the middle distance. Voices came through the pin connection as if spoken through cotton. It had taken some time, but Jada quickly adjusted to the muffled sound.

"We need to bring the rebels to heel," King Regon said. "Any word from the Verna Horn?"

"They've scattered into the woods," a military commander with a shirt full of medals told him. "Our allies at the Horn tell us that they don't have supplies to make it more than a few months. The rebels will surrender before winter."

“Not good enough,” King Regon growled. “Tell them that if the rebels aren’t found by the end of the month, burn the forest down.”

If there was any dissent, Jada didn’t hear it from the council. There was more discussion about the rebels, pirates and one outlying colony that was nothing more than a family living on an island. Her uncle was nearly threatening to go to the island himself to force them to join his new Alliance. The Conquest for Peace was beginning to become the new legacy her uncle would leave behind.

“There was a time when your uncle wouldn’t have stomached such sycophantic toadies...”

Jada nearly dropped her book. Lord Devron had snuck up behind her, his arms folded and his face a stern scowl. He looked beyond Jada, directly down into the courtyard and shook his head. “You’ve noticed a change in him too...”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“That pin you gave the Duchess Lysana is quite lovely,” Lord Devron said, sitting on the bench with Jada, “but your copy is too loud. I’m no mage, but even I know a minor enchantment when I see one.”

Jada set her book aside and pulled the pin away from her ear. It was loud enough to hear something, though not make out individual words. Jada was a worse spy than she imagined. “Will you tell him?”

“I won’t,” Lord Devron said. “I’m worried he wouldn’t listen to me. Unless we can come forward with ideas for his peace conquest, I doubt either of us will be of much use to him. He only wants to listen to people who think he’s in the right.”

Jada shook her head and looked away. Her uncle was still talking with the circle of courtiers, walking around them with his staff stamping into the yard. Jade took a steady breath and looked to Lord Devron. “Would you stop him?”

“Regon is my friend. Whatever is happening to him breaks my heart. If I knew a way to stop him, I would.”

“Even if it broke his heart?”

“The man I knew? The friend I had would not stand for this. It would break this new Regon’s heart to put an end to his conquest. This fight for peace is going to turn him into a monster. At the end of his life, I need my friend to be back by my side.”

Jada swallowed and steeled herself. "It's the staff."

"It does seem to have changed him. The pride in his symbol has—"

"No," Jada shook her head. "The staff is what's changing him. Devron, I've made a mistake. Darillic isn't what we thought it is."

"How do you mean?"

"The runes are magic. The sentence I made in Darillic is corrupting him somehow. That power has taken his mind and—"

"Wait..." Lord Devron shook his head. "What do you mean? How do you know the runes are magic?"

"I've used them. I've seen what they can do."

"I believe you," Lord Devron said. "Tell me everything..."

"You have to swear," Jada said. "We can't tell anyone about this."

"I'll swear on anything," Lord Devron said. "Tell me what you need done."

Jada took her quill and drew some runes on the back of her hand. Darillic danced in her vision again, a rune that meant 'trust' or 'covenant' came to her mind. She drew it on her hand and replicated the runes on the back of Lord Devron's hand. She took his hand in her grip and looked to Lord Devron. "Words spoken between us," Jada explained, "do not leave us."

"Agreed," Lord Devron said. A warmth passed between them, but Jada understood that their treason bound them more than the magic did.

## Chapter 17

The preparations were quick. Lana had already packed a trunk of her things, including her smithing tools, and waited in her forge for the carriage to arrive. Before the footmen could jump down, Lana hoisted the trunk onto a rack in the back of the carriage and stepped into the cab quickly. She was mercifully alone and the footmen didn't disturb her the entire trip.

At the castle, the grounds were still tended by the deer and the servants were quick to help with Lana's baggage. A new royal banner featuring Lana's staff and an owl hung from every tower and snapped in the wind out of reach at the top of flag poles. An attendant led Lana silently to Jada's study. Jada sat at her desk with her left ankle crossed over her right knee and silently dismissed the servant. When the door closed, Jada's stiff facade cracked and she relaxed. She pointed at the ceiling and a series of runes circled the roof.

"We can speak freely here. Were you followed? Does anyone know you're here?"

"Not from home," Lana said. "Though it would be foolish to think no one in the castle saw me."

"My uncle knows you're here," Jada said. "I told him we are working on a new collaboration to use Darillic in metal again."

"How did he take that?"

"He cares for little else than his peace and the staff these days. To that end, I have a forge that we can use when the time comes."

"How will we get the staff?"

"My uncle is rarely without it," Jada said, "but my aunt has told him not to bring the staff with him into the dining hall with guests. It's an agreement that may have saved their marriage."

"And I'm guessing there's a dinner invitation for someone other than us?"

"A few nobles are coming to witness the Celestial Scar," Jada said. "It's going to be a beautiful night, so the King and Queen are having a dinner to commemorate it. It was suggested to my uncle by a confidant."

"Yours or your uncle's?"

A knock at the door made Lana tense. Jada raised a hand and stood. She walked over to the door and waited. Another set of knocks followed and Jada opened the room. Lord

Devron came in with a smile that seemed to be holding his face together. "I think we'll leave this particular meeting out of the epic..."

"Lord Devron..."

"Please, Lana, we're at a point where you don't have to call me by my full title anymore. After all, if we fail, impropriety will be the least of my worries."

"Devron is helping us," Jada nodded. She raised her hand and showed the faint outline of the raised rune on her hand like a scar. "We share a common goal: destroy the staff to save my uncle."

"And Adria by extension," Lana said. "What are your plans?"

"Playing the gregarious showman," Lord Devron said. "There are enough stories about the Celestial Scar to fill three dinners. I will be able to keep your uncle busy and hold the attention of his guests. I will be giving you time away from the king and his guests."

"The problem we face is the two guards that will be protecting the staff," Jada explained. "When he puts his staff away, my uncle locks it in a glass case protected by two armed soldiers. And it's not a glory job for some noble's kid; they are well-trained guards who protect my uncle's chambers at night."

"Though it feels more for the staff than the king and queen these days," Lord Devron said.

"So we need to get rid of them?"

"Not exactly," Jada said. "We need to go through the window."

"Sorry, you mean, you need to go through the window, right?"

"I have a spell that we can use," Jada said. "We're going to fight Darillic with Darillic."

"You've talked about Darillic like it's alive," Lana said. "Doesn't that mean that it will try to protect itself?"

"The problem is we tried to bind Darillic," Jada said. "It wants to be free...used once and let loose into the world."

"Words are meant to be spoken," Lord Devron explained. "Even words of power want to be understood, not sealed into metal for a select few."

"So, you're going to walk through the window—"

"We," Jada corrected. "I need your help to get rid of the lock."

"Won't the noise get the attention of the two guards?"

“Runes,” Jada said. “Darillic has been coming to me every hour of the night. It feels like more proof that Darillic wants us to do this.”

“Alright,” Lana nodded. “And you’ve...tested these?”

“Briefly,” Jada said, darting an eye to Lord Devron. “I mean, at least once...each.”

“Did it work?” Lana asked.

“Long enough for what you’ll need to do,” Lord Devron confirmed. “I’ll leave the two of you to it. If I’m to be an over-the-top entertainer for this evening, I have to properly set my stage.”

“Devron?” Lana said. “Thank you.”

“Destroy the staff,” Lord Devron said sternly. “Bring my king back.”

Lord Devron left the study, closing the door behind him and leaving Lana alone with the mage. “What happens now?”

“Let’s get your forge prepared,” Jada said. “Tell me what you need to destroy the staff.”

## Chapter 18

Lana was briefly impressed with the amenities of her temporary forge, but it was shortly snuffed out as reality set in. The fire was stocked with logs like beams of a long house. A massive cauldron hung over it, swinging loosely as Lana touched the smooth, dark face of the pot. There were dozens of different sized hammers, three anvils, and some of the most advanced tools that Lana had only heard of.

Lana was also given two assistants. They were a pair of young kids that Lana thought were good enough to be trusted to keep the forge burning. They didn't ask too many questions and they were smart enough to understand what was happening was beyond them. Jada and Lana set them to work at splitting wood and keeping the fire burning for the night.

With their fire tended to, Jada explained the nature of the runes that they would use for tonight. Jada seemed almost excited to talk about the runes of her plan. She explained about how she had figured out different ways to use the runes by drawing them on different surfaces. She drew a rune on the bottom of her shoes and took three steps up the wall. The silence rune worked perfectly, stifling the noise of a glass shattering while Lana was standing right next to it. Jada was judicious about erasing the runes when she was finished using them, releasing the magic back into what she called 'The Ether'.

As the day faded to night and the ghost of the Celestial Scar took shape, Lana had her assistants keep the forge burning as hot as they could manage, boiling a vat of steel until it was red hot and bubbling. As they started to work, Lana assured them she would be back. However, she still wasn't sure if that promise rang true to herself. Walking through the halls, Lana could see servants rushing back and forth, preparing the veranda for the nobility and the evening's entertainment.

Jada was sitting in her room, nursing a cup of steaming tea as she stared into the middle distance. Lana sat across from her, waiting for a moment. Jada took a short breath in and blinked quickly, shifting her position a little. She looked up at Lana and frowned a little. "I'm sorry," Jada shook her head. "I've found I keep slipping in and out sometimes."

"Are you alright?"

"I...don't know," Jada said. She sipped her tea and swallowed, waiting patiently as she formed her thoughts. "I think that the Darillic in my mind is working against me sometimes."

All that time trying to capture it and it feels like I'm taken from my senses when one comes to me. Like the runes forged into my uncle's staff, I'm worried that Darillic is burned on my mind."

"Your uncle's staff is metal, but your mind is a part of you. I don't think it's the same."

"The runes aren't mine. I should never have tried to control them. They come to me now as if to punish me...driving me mad until I break."

"If Darillic is truly as alive as you say, I think it's using you to free the other runes. Darillic came to you, no other mage."

"I used Darillic and bound it to my service. If it is alive, then I have committed a great crime."

"That you are making amends for. You can free it—and yourself—in one action. But what happens afterward is up to you. Would you give up Darillic?"

"If my uncle demands it, I would have to build a new staff."

"And what if you were free of your uncle?"

"There are others who would bend to his will. Others who would use Darillic as a weapon and a slave. Lana, while I was gone, someone came to my chambers. He was talking about his own project about Darillic and he wanted my help. I don't know how much Darillic he learned, but they have enough. They may be able to make the sentence again."

"Perhaps that's why it comes to you. Maybe that's your purpose now. Leave the castle behind and focus on working with Darillic to save Darillic. Besides, the sentence was only a part of it. We didn't write out how to make the gold runes fit into the staff."

"Maybe you're right," Jada sighed, "I've been trying so hard to shake free from my family name—my parents, my uncle—and defend something bigger than myself. This is my path. My calling is to Darillic and magic itself, but I don't think I can do it alone."

"I crafted weapons until I saw they were hurting others," Lana nodded. "You pursued Darillic until you saw it hurt others. Maybe you were meant to do all of this: hunting the runes, making the staff, breaking it apart again, and turning your back on those who would abuse it."

"That's a nice story. I hope we have a happy ending."

"If you'd like, I know of a small cottage in the woods by my village. Small, true, and in need of repair. But it would suit a young mage fine for her hermitage and lifelong study."

“I wouldn’t mind some company now and then, if you’d be nearby.”

“I would like that,” Lana said. They sat in silence for a few long moments. Jada wasn’t trapped by the runes or plans, focusing on the window as it faded from dim light to darkness. Lana could see the smoke rising from her forge and heard the tuning of the instruments down below.

“It’s time,” Jada said. She picked up her quill and lifted the soles of her shoes to Lana. She drew the runes on the bottoms of her boots and copied the shapes onto Lana’s shoes as well. Together, they took a few steps up the wall, hanging sideways in the air. Lana tightened the strip of cloth around her skirts and looked up to Jada. Jada opened the window and stepped outside into the night air.

## Chapter 19

The side of the castle was smoother than any path Lana had walked before. The bricks felt like cobblestones as she walked and set her position, though the shift in gravity made her feel a little sick. A quick look up to Jada made her more comfortable and even got a quick smile, noticing Jada's jacket hanging towards her. Jada rose up and started walking along the side of the castle. Lana felt a little uneasy as the world shifted, the ground to her right and the sky to her left. Jada picked up the pace and Lana ran by her side.

In the courtyard, there was the sound of silverware against plates, Lord Devron's theatrical voice, and gentle music. On the opposite side of the building, people were enjoying the evening, but Lana was thrilled as they ran. She had never thought of herself as a risk taker, but the thrill of running along a wall made her heart race. Jada was rushing quickly, bobbing and weaving between windows and arrow slits. To the left, Lana saw the torches of guards patrolling the top wall, unaware of the thrill below them. Jada slipped between two windows and staggered a little. Lana panicked when Jada fell, heading straight for the ground.

Rushing forward, Lana grabbed Jada's arm as she hung in the air. Jada's legs swung freely and it felt like Lana's arms were going to pull out of the sockets. Jada eventually shifted, putting a foot against the stone face, and her weight settled on the wall again. When Jada stepped and raised her left shoe experimentally, Lana saw the rune elongated on the bottom of her shoe when Jada turned her foot around.

"Ink smudged," Jada cursed herself. She stepped on the wall and frowned. "I need to redo the rune somewhere flat."

"We'll have to finish this walk together," Lana whispered, a little out of breath. "Come closer."

Lana adjusted so that her right leg touched Jada's left and bound them together with the band from around her head. After a few tests, Lana was able to hold Jada's weight long enough for them both to finish their strides. Together, they walked, sharing the middle stride and walking together with the outside leg. They staggered a little, but managed to keep their pace and spacing well after a while. Jada would correct their direction when they got off track and they made it to the balcony, where the king and queen would enjoy the seaside views before bed.

Jada entered the room first, carefully stepping on the floorboards before kneeling on the floor. She drew the silence rune four times on the floor and circled it before the runes flashed silently to activate. Jada turned and nodded at Lana. She turned and watched the door, quill in one hand and a wooden club in the other.

Rushing through the bedroom, Lana examined the looming presence of the massive four-post bed and armoire. A small table with chairs was positioned by the window, tea cups left mostly finished. On the far side of the room, a glass case lined with iron bars held the Staff of King Regon.

The lock was clearly custom-built, heavy, and reinforced with redundancies. Lana lifted the lock and could feel the weight of the tumblers as they shifted. The key must have been as thick as two of her fingers. Even a talented thief wouldn't be able to pick the lock. Lana was fortunate in that she didn't have to waste time with subtlety.

The tools she'd brought would normally have made too much noise. The chisel she'd brought was big enough to crack through bricks of metal and the hammer she'd brought weighed as much as a knight's mace. From the first swing, Lana saw the glass shatter and winced. The sound didn't break through the runes and Lana was able to keep working. It took another four swings to get through only half of the lock's shackle. She was sweating more and more with each swing. The staff inside shivered and shook with each strike of Lana's hammer. The act felt wrong, the swing and impact missing the sound of a metallic crack. It felt like Lana was taking a breath and couldn't release it properly.

The vibrations of each strike traveled up her arm and made her teeth shake. The lock trembled with a few final strikes before it snapped. She smiled and twisted the lock open, pulling it off the door and setting it aside. The staff stood in the case, silently judging Lana as she surveyed it. It was a masterwork of metal, the gold runes perfectly blended into the rest of the staff. Picking it up, the weight was powerful in Lana's hands, the staff evenly balanced in her palms.

Turning back to Jada, Lana's elation turned to panic. Jada stood over one guard with her club covered in blood as the other rushed in behind her. Lana swung the staff, feeling the weight of her swing as the hammer face impacted the guard's chest. Lifted off the ground, the guard's face puckered at the impact, and his body flew across the bedroom and struck a wall. The man slumped against the floor and collapsed. Lana reached out to pull Jada away,

but the mage shooed her. Drawing a rune on the back of each soldier's neck, the runes flashed before disappearing. Jada and Lana left the room together, Jada scuffing out the silence runes as they rushed by.

Sound returned in a rush, music flooding in the space that existed outside of Jada's sphere of silence. Lana caught her breath while Jada redrew the Darillic rune on the bottom of her shoe. "What happened?"

"I think we underestimated the sphere of silence," Jada said. "The guards got suspicious and came in. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. Will they remember us?"

"No," Jada shook her head. "If they did see us, they won't remember us. That rune came to me as I was thinking the same thing."

"Let's get to the forge."

"This way!" Jada said, leading Lana downward to the ground level. Alarmed shouts quickly overpowered the music as guards rushed around. Panic was starting to come from the king's tower and Lana felt her pulse rising at the threat of being caught red-handed.

The duo ran down the side of the wall and made a sharp turn into a low window. Lana ran down the hall, staff in hand. The glow of the forge was still shining. Jada ran ahead and pushed the doors to the forge open, stopping Lana from entering the room.

"Out!" Jada yelled as they rushed into the room. "Get out now!"

The kids dropped the logs in their hands and rushed out of the room to avoid Jada's ire. They were so fast to escape that they didn't even look to the side where Lana was hiding. Lana ran through the open doors. The two kids had kept the bubbling steel in the cauldron red hot, ugly and powerful. The fire still blazed up the sides of the pot. Lana rushed forward and climbed onto a table. She reached out and dropped the staff in the forge.

"More wood!" Lana said. "We need the metal hotter!" Jada started throwing wood into the fire as Lana worked the bellows, pulling down with all of her weight. The flames surged higher with each drop. The forge became a furnace, as the metal in the pot boiled.

"What are you doing?" King Regon yelled, pushing the doors open. "Stop this at once!"

Lana backed away from the bellows and looked to the cauldron. The staff was half submerged in the molten metal, lines of heat distorting Lana's vision. Jada tossed more wood into the fire.

“Jada, enough!”

“We have to destroy it!” Jada said. “We have to!”

“You will do as I say! The world shall be as one, united in purpose and will! By my hand!”

“The staff is corrupting you! Don’t you see it! The Darillic is driving you mad!”

“I am your king!” King Regon roared, shoving Jada aside. “It is my hand that will right the world!”

King Regon reached out and grabbed the staff. Yelling in pain, King Regon pulled his hand away from the staff, bright red with welts already forming on his palm. Before he could reach with his other hand, Jada pulled him away from the cauldron. King Regon lost his balance and stumbled backwards, gripping at his hand as he yelled. Lana cringed and fled back from the sound.

“I’m sorry,” Jada said, putting a hand on the king’s head. “I’m so sorry.”

Jada spoke again, but the sound was like the ocean against Lana’s ears. The sound made her vision go blurry, and her head was light for a moment. She stood, leaning against the table and trying to shake off whatever was happening. After a moment of confusion, Lana was able to keep her stance. Jada rose off the ground, King Regon lying on the ground beneath her with his eyes and mouth peacefully closed. There was a little blood in the corner of Jada’s mouth, but she wiped it away with the back of her hand.

“Is he dead?”

“No,” Jada shook her head. “Asleep...and maybe healed. I used Darillic...”

“That wasn’t a rune.”

“It was,” Jada said, looking at Lana. Her eyes looked a little hollow, but there was peace to it. “I spoke Darillic. I saw that rune in mind and...it just made a sound.”

“Is he ok?”

“He will be. He’ll forget what happened down here, but he will wake up again.”

“You’re sure?”

“It’s what it told me,” Jada shrugged. “I have to trust in Darillic...because Darillic trusts me.”

Lana was about to say more, but the cauldron sparked with a loud crack. Lana looked over at the boiling metal and watched the staff submerge further into the liquid. The staff

bent over under the heat and buckled under the weight of the hammer head. The rod of the staff warped until it was all submerged in the boiling metal.

“What now?” Lana asked.

“Leave it,” Jada shook her head. “Let it melt and harden. If there’s any piece of the staff left, leave it in the slag.”

“Agreed,” Lana said. “We should get out of here.”

“My quarters,” Jada ordered.

As she climbed up the walls, Lana could hear the castle was full of movement. Guards were shouting commands and the doors around the castle were being locked down. Jada and Lana moved up to the mage’s tower and slipped in through the window. Closing the window behind them, Jada sat in her chair and took off her boots.

“Now what?” Lana asked.

“We wait until they declare the castle is safe,” Jada said, cleaning the ink off her shoes. “They’ll find the king and lock down the castle, but we were in my chambers all evening... discussing the details of our project.”

“Will they track us down?”

“I don’t think so,” Jada shook her head. “The guards’ memories of the event are lost and King Regon will wake up without remembering the staff at all.”

“Won’t he just try to make a new staff?”

“Maybe, but he won’t be able to do it without me.”

“Without us,” Lana corrected. She sat on the bed and took off her shoes. The sounds of confusion outside were muffled behind the mage’s door and alarm bells were coming from somewhere on the high wall.

“The guards will be confused until morning,” Jada said. “We should sleep.”

“Are you alright?”

“I’m not hurt.”

“That’s not what I asked. You spoke Darillic. I didn’t hear the word, but I could feel it. How do you feel after saying it?”

“It was...” Jada frowned and shook her head. “I could feel it in every part of my mind and body. It didn’t hurt...not exactly. It was intense and vibrated in the base of my skull. The

word appeared in my mind, surged down my spine and through my breath. It was like drinking a strong liquor, but it came from deep within.”

“When the Darillic came to you,” Lana said, leaning back on the pillows, “did you know it wouldn’t kill him? Your uncle?”

“I could sense it. It wasn’t a word of power like in Adriran, where I knew what it meant down to the definition of each syllable. But when it came to me, I felt the true meaning. And I trusted Darillic to keep me from doing any real harm. I don’t think Darillic wants to harm anyone.”

“You were bleeding...”

“I know,” Jada said, looking at the smear of blood across the back of her hand. “But I think it was a warning. I know the word, but I shouldn’t use it.”

“If you say you’re alright? I believe you. Just don’t hide it from me. Please.”

“I won’t,” Jada said, allowing a small smile. “You know my biggest secrets...I won’t keep this from you.”

Jada lay on the bed and closed her eyes. Lana tried to sleep, but the sounds of concern and fear kept her awake. The rest of the night made her feel like the guards were going to kick the door down any minute. When the sun started to rise and Lana was still in Jada’s room, she was finally able to sleep.

## Epilogue

The aftermath of the heist lasted for three months, though it didn't stop Lana from traveling back to her forge. Most of the concern was the well-being of the king and queen rather than the staff. As the summer nights turned to autumn, the Campaign for Peace soured for most people. Peace eventually came, but not by destroying those who opposed King Regon. Lana saw him twice over the course of the investigation. He seemed weaker and tired, though he was more like the man that Lana had met before the influence of the staff. He was happier and at peace with the loss of his once great staff.

On the first day of autumn, the air was bright and crisp, leaves fading to darker hues and spiraling off their branches. Lana walked through the woods with a basket under one arm. With the curls of smoke from her forge behind her, Lana walked deeper into the woods, towards a new tendril of smoke from a new chimney.

Jada was outside in her garden, tending to the vegetables she'd planted. She'd taken off her mage's robes, opting for linen pants and a light, cotton shirt. A hat covered her head and her hands were smeared with dirt up to the elbows. Looking up from her garden plot, Jada smiled and set her gardening tools aside.

"The new house looks great!" Lana said. The cabin had been a collapsing ruin, but Jada had paid for it to be refurbished. The stonework was well done and the roof had been replaced with fresh, red tiles. The trees surrounded her house, while vines had been artfully grown around the fence surrounding her garden.

"Come in," Jada smiled, leading Lana inside. Jada's house looked like the study in her tower: books scattered everywhere, quills and inkwells dangerously open on the desk, and a wall made of slate with Darillic symbols written across it. There was an elegant bed by the fireplace and a small kettle of tea hanging over the crackling flame within. Lana and Jada sat at a small table by the window, sharing tea and the pastries Lana had brought. They exchanged some small talk, but it was just covering what Lana really wanted to ask.

"Have you found any new runes?"

"Some," Jada said, looking at her slate wall. "They mostly represent ideas too abstract to put into modern languages."

"Have you heard from your uncle? The new High Mage or your parents?"

"Lots of questions, but no one presses. Though I do have...a confession."

“Oh?”

Jada leaned in conspiratorially, holding out a set of three new runes she had written hastily on a piece of paper. “I think someone else is close to uncovering Darillic.”

“Do you know where?”

“I have an inkling,” Jada said, “I feel like I need to be there...to guide them and help them understand it.”

“Are you sure you want to travel? You do seem to prefer your routine and the way you keep things.”

“I wouldn’t mind if there was someone familiar to travel with me. Do you think you could?”

Lana took a deep breath and thought for a minute. She stared contemplatively into her tea and took a bite of her sweet roll. “You want me to come with you to help stop people from using Darillic for harmful reasons?”

“I want you to come with me as my friend. I trust you to help me do the right thing. You understand the act of creation without using a thing for harm.”

“Having power and not using it,” Lana thought. “A lot of people won’t like it if we tell them what to do with their new power.”

“It’s better than the alternative,” Jada said.

“So, where do we start?” Lana asked with a gentle grin