

A Gift for a Lady

The night sky was clear, revealing a canvas of twinkling stars against a deep black backdrop. Though both moons were both naught but slivers, they shone down upon Eona, combining to cast a pale, silvery light that illuminated the surrounding landscape. The air was refreshingly cool, the kind that made you want to wrap yourself up in a warm blanket, even though it wasn't necessary. A soft breeze blew, stirring the leaves of nearby trees and creating a gentle rustling sound that provided a soothing background melody.

Sloane and Gisele had spent the past few hours practicing their magic, honing their skills, and experimenting with new spells as the other knights trained in their own way with Nemura and Stefan. As they lay together on a wool blanket, they looked up at the sky, mesmerized by the beauty and vastness of the universe. Despite the tranquility of the moment, Sloane couldn't help but feel a tinge of sadness creeping in.

She let out a sigh, prompting Gisele to turn her head and stare at Sloane. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Whenever I look up at the stars, I can't help but be reminded how strange all of this is," Sloane replied, her voice laced with melancholy.

"The stars? Not the sisters, or well, everything else?" Gisele asked.

She glanced at the two moons—one waning gibbous and the other waxing gibbous—hanging eerily in the sky. Gisele shivered, imagining them as the eyes of a dragon, peering down imperiously. She wondered how such a sight might have influenced the development of religion and society.

I wonder what effect that would have on the development of religion and society...

"It's always struck me as funny that people refer to the two moons as 'the sisters'," Sloane said. "On the morning I left for here, there was news about a test of a... vessel that could eventually take people to another planet. I remember standing there, imagining what it would be like to set foot on another world. And now I'm here. But yes, it's not just the stars and planets that fascinate me. Our own moon was visited long before I was even born. It wasn't *new*."

"The thought of exploring something new always drew me in, and now I'm here... I can't quite focus on how amazing this all is, because every time I do my thoughts turn to Gwyn." She took a deep breath. Changing the subject, she pointed up at the center of the sky. "There, on Earth, you would see a star called Polaris. It is the brightest star in Earth's sky. In old times, it would have been called a lodestar. A stable reference for ships to navigate at night as they sailed the world."

Gisele sighed. “Every time you say something like *that*, it calls to me. My people would love to be able to explore the open seas.”

Sloane rolled to her side into a reclining position, propped up on an elbow, and her head resting on her hand. “Tell me about it. You are all from an island nation. Why do you not go exploring?”

“Sailing is dangerous, for all that it is quicker. Ships are expensive, and losing one is a decent setback for any entity that owns one. We have charts for the positions of each moon then we reference those in another logbook that estimates tides and other effects. The seas are ferocious and constantly pound every ship with waves. The deeper you go, the larger the waves. Then—”

“Sorry, but I had completely forgotten how having two moons would affect the oceans. How are there even cities on the coast? Wouldn’t they be pounded constantly with tsunamis and huge tides?” Sloane asked, fascinated by the subject. She perked up. “Huh... that actually makes the no months thing make more sense.”

Gisele tilted her head as if considering Sloane’s questions. “I... I am not sure I understand your questions, Sloane. Everything just *is*, it is all we have known. The coasts are protected by tides and giant swells because of the cliffs.”

“So your coastlines are filled with cliffs... that makes sense I guess. If you’ve always had the moons then your land would have been transformed by the...”

The two spoke more about the differences in sailing and how having a second moon affected such. A wistful little sound escaped from Gisele as Sloane spoke of Earth’s comparatively calm oceans and the Age of Discovery. Sloane gathered that the ocean vessels here were ridiculously over-engineered compared to her own world’s. She couldn’t wait to see it for herself, especially when Gisele spoke of the propensity for sea gates.

Later, as Sloane walked toward the tent that she was sharing with the young priestess-in-training, Mariel, she looked up at the sky and a smile spread across her face as a memory from Earth flooded her mind. She remembered the time she and Gwyn had spent hours on a beach in Australia, just gazing up at the stars.

Gwyn was only nine at the time, but she had been fascinated by the southern sky, with its unfamiliar stars and constellations. Sloane had patiently pointed out each major grouping, telling stories about their myths and legends. They had talked about the vastness of the universe and the possibility of other planets out there, teeming with life.

Sloane remembered how they had snuggled together under a blanket, feeling the sand between their toes and the cool sea breeze on their faces. They had talked about anything and everything, and for a few brief hours, nothing else in the world had mattered.

I wonder what she thinks of this sky.



The words "innovation" and "revolutionary" had lost their meaning in Sloane's world. With incremental advancements happening every day, true breakthroughs were hard to come by. Some might argue that her fusion of magic and technology hadn't created anything truly new; after all, humans had been making progress with similar devices for centuries.

But what Sloane was doing was different.

She was harnessing an esoteric, abstract power source that could create matter from nothing but magic. Mana, as she coined it, was a multidimensional energy that permeated everything and yet retained enough power to perform extraordinary feats.

Sloane was fascinated by the mysteries of mana. Where did it come from? What was the source of its power?

The more she worked with it, the more her hypothesis that there was a well of power somewhere seemed to be true. And the cores allowed them to access it.

These were the thoughts that kept Sloane up at night, but she knew it was worth it. Her work was truly revolutionary, and with every new discovery, she felt more alive than ever before. The fact that *she* was having a noticeable impact on the world, was—

It was...

Terrifying.

It was the next day in their travels, and inside their wagon, Sloane felt a sense of nervousness and anticipation as she gazed at the nearly complete *caster*. The device, which resembled a gun more than anything else, needed just a handful of runes to be enchanted and empowered before she felt it ready. She had already finished the spell cartridges, which were painted to easily discern which spell rune they contained.

Ismeld would just need to decide which payloads needed to be unleashed between the [**Mana Bolt**] and [**Arcane Lance**] cartridges.

In the end, the *caster* was nowhere near as advanced or capable as she had originally hoped. Now, it was still potent, but Ismeld would not be able to give up her sword just yet. The main reason was that she had to design it as a breechloader.

Sloane had hoped to incorporate her **Flashbang** spell into some of the cartridges, but the spell had not performed well with such a small working. Undaunted, she turned her attention to creating more grenades for the knights, along with a revolutionary device that could recharge spent cartridges and grenades. The Runic Renewal Device, which was about the size of a suitcase, could restore the depleted ammunition in just one day.

Sloane knew that her invention was genuinely groundbreaking. With the Runic Renewal Device, the knights would not need to carry multiple sets of ammunition with them into battle like soldiers from her world. They could simply recharge their spent cartridges and grenades, saving time and resources. It was just one more way that Sloane's fusion of magic and technology was changing the world.

The strength of the resulting spell cast by the cartridges was dictated by the mana density of the crystal that powered the caster. The one she had installed in what would be the first magic-based firearm, did not provide a similar punch to the **Mana Bolts** Sloane could cast through pure magic.

A sudden jolt of the wagon shook Sloane's grip on her enchanting pen, almost causing her to drop it, as they hit a pothole or some other unexpected obstacle on their journey. Sloane let out a frustrated sigh, knowing that any mistake in her enchanting could potentially render the caster inoperable. She quickly checked her work and let out a sigh of relief as she saw that the runes were still intact and the caster was unharmed.

“What was that, Lady Reinhart?” Mariel asked from where she was sitting and reading.

Sloane turned toward the girl. “Just a bump or something. We’ll hear if there are any issues.”

The raithe girl nodded before returning to her book, her eyes darting back and forth across the pages as she began to read.

With a deep breath, Sloane **Focused** her mind on the task before her. She tightened her hold on the enchanting pen and proceeded to carefully inscribe the last set of runes onto the Caster, her movements precise and deliberate.

As she worked, Sloane could feel the mana coursing through her core and into the pen, her **Runic Knowledge** supplying what she needed to finish the final **[Reinforce]** and **[Repair]** runic chains.

With one last push of mana, the runes lit up and the caster was complete. The breechloading spell-slinging pistol was ready.

Shouts from outside caused her to lift her head in surprise, then she felt herself falling. The sudden jolt of the wagon brought it to an abrupt halt, causing her to lose her balance and topple over.

As she fell, she heard Mariel scream out in surprise.

Sloane hit her head hard on the wooden floor, the impact sending a sharp pain through her skull. As she groaned and rubbed her head, she saw that the supplies on her workbench had been jolted and scattered onto the wagon floor.

She quickly recovered from her fall and scrambled to check on the raithe girl.

“Mariel! Are you alright?”

The girl nodded, her eyes wide with fear. “You said we would hear if there are issues—”

Urgent shouting caused them both to freeze before she heard pounding on the door.

Sloane narrowed her eyes. “Quiet..”

Mariel nodded quickly.

Not knowing what was going on, Sloane grabbed the caster and loaded it with a spell cartridge before snatching up the pouch that held a supply of more. With a determined look, she prepared herself for whatever danger awaited outside the wagon.

As the door suddenly jerked open, Sloane's hand instinctively shot up, gripping the caster tightly.

Tiberius let out a cry as he prepared to attack the intruder.

“Wrryaatt!”

Sloane quickly turned to face the doorway just as Nemura stepped in.

"Nemura, what's going on?" Sloane asked, her hand still gripping the caster.

"There's trouble," her telv guard replied, her voice tense.

Sloane nodded, her heart racing with anticipation and fear.

“Mariel, stay here,” she said.

The girl's eyes went wide again. “No! Don't leave,” she said.

“I will be right outside. I won't let anyone inside,” Sloane reassured the girl. She took a deep breath to calm herself before following Nemura out of the wagon, the caster at the ready.

As they emerged into the chaos outside, Sloane could see a group of armed men closing in on their position. She felt her grip tighten on the caster as she braced herself for a fight, her mind racing with possibilities and strategies.

Sloane cast a sidelong glance at her mechanical bird and commanded, "Tiberius, scout the area and search for any other threats."

In response, her falcon let out a sharp cry of acknowledgment, before soaring into the sky to carry out the task.

Nemura glanced at her. “We don't know who they are, but they demanded the girl. Cristole and Deryk declined,” she explained. She then turned and yelled toward the front. “Stefan, we're covering the rear!”

“Coming!” the man shouted from the bench of the wagon.

“Shit. Okay, I'll provide support,” Sloane said.

The telv woman nodded.

Sloane searched for Ismeld and quickly found the elf sitting atop her horse with her gauntlet's **[Spell Buckler]** activated.

“Ismeld! Hurry, come here!” she shouted.

The blonde high elf turned her head and narrowed her eyes before giving a nod of understanding. She quickly spurred her horse in Sloane's direction.

“What is it? We are busy here,” the woman said quickly, her eyes darting between the approaching force.

Sloane turned the caster around and held it out toward Ismeld. “Take this, use it. It'll fire a **[Mana Bolt]**,” she said, trying to express urgency.

She turned her head as magic use caught her eye. A series of shields started rapidly casting as Gisele in her enchanted armor, with its glowing red and blue runes, rushed at the armed men.

Ismeld saw the woman and let out a strangled noise as if the thought of missing out on the fight was unbearable. She reached down to the pouches at her waist, grabbed a runic grenade, and threw it. After a moment, the **[Arcane Explosion]** of the grenade went off, taking out a section of the oncoming men.

As the dust settled, Sloane and Ismeld could see that there were still several armed men remaining. Gisele continued to charge at them, her shields appearing to deflect the arrows that were shot in her direction.

The blonde narrowed her eyes. “Sloane, this is not the time!” Then, she too kicked her horse into a gallop toward the men.

Ismeld spurred her horse towards Gisele, quickly catching up to her. Together, they coordinated their attacks and engaged in a fierce battle with the remaining armed men. Their swords clashed and spells flew as they battled with all their might. The magic shields the women employed glowed amidst the dust from Ismeld's use of grenades with nearly reckless abandon.

Nemura and Stefan fought together at the rear of the wagon, their swords clashing against the armed men who tried to breach their defenses. The tall and muscular telv woman easily dispatched three men at a time with her massive blade, while the agile raithe, Stefan, weaved through another group with deadly precision.

Meanwhile, Deryk, Maud, and Cristole held their own against the men who had approached the wagon from the front, their swords flashing as they parried and struck with practiced ease.

Sloane glanced around, trying to determine what she could do to help, but every time she lifted her hand to cast, one of the knights or guards would get in her way and strike down the target.

The chaotic battle raged on, with blood, dust, and debris flying everywhere. Sloane felt frustrated, unable to help her companions in the thick of the fight. Suddenly,

her watch buzzed as its connection to Tiberius indicated he saw something important. Activating the watch's **[Golem Sight]**, she was presented with a picture of what Tiberius saw on the nearby hill. Her heart sank as she realized that more armed men were approaching.

Sloane drew deep from mana, channeling the arcane energy through her jewelry to empower her magic.

She weaved together her **Arcane Mortar** spell, the mana quickly coalescing together into a bright light that shone from her hand and expanded into a large crackling ball of arcane energy. Sloane threw everything she had into the spell, visibly straining as she kept pouring more mana than usual to overpower the magic for a single overwhelming hit. The ground rumbled beneath her, and the hair on her arms stood on end. With a fierce shout, she released the spell, and a bright burst of blue energy shot out from her hands, hurtling towards the hill.

The ball soared through the air before it sped up on its descent and hit the hill with a deafening boom, sending a shockwave rippling through the ground—which Sloane could feel reverberating through her body.

The explosion was massive, engulfing the group of armed men who had just started making their way down the hill. The sound was deafening, and it was as if the world around her was silenced. For the first time due to her own spellcasting, she was forced to shield her eyes from the bright light and dust that filled the air, even as a great rush surged through her.

It was as if she gained several steps from the single action.

When the dust settled, Sloane saw that the entire group of men who had been descending the hill were now gone. The blast had utterly decimated them, leaving only rubble and smoke in its wake. The hillside was scorched and blackened, and the smell of burning flesh filled the air.

An overwhelming wave of exhaustion washed over her, and she felt herself sag, forcing her to shuffle to maintain her footing. She let out a breath that she didn't even realize she had been holding and looked around. The battle was over, and the attackers had been defeated. Sloane felt a sense of relief wash over her as she realized that she and her companions had all survived the encounter.

Who the hell were they?

What remained of the men that had attacked them rushed away, leaving a group of weary knights, guards, and Sloane.

“Are you alright?” Nemura asked as she joined Sloane.

Sloane nodded slowly. “I really need to stop doing that.”

The telv woman sighed and reached into a small pouch attached to her belt, pulling out two small vials. “Here. You need them more than I do,” she said.

Sloane accepted the offered mental and physical stamina elixirs, swiftly gulping down both and grimacing at the unpleasant medicinal flavor of the potions. As soon as she drank them, Sloane could feel a surge of energy coursing through her body. Her mind cleared, and she felt more alert and focused than she had in hours.

“Thank you, Nemura. I needed that,” she said before looking around at the impromptu skirmish grounds. “Who were they?”

Approaching, Gisele revealed, “The attackers didn’t say. They simply demanded the priestess and attacked as soon as Cristole declined.”

Sloane blinked. “Wait, what? Surely she isn’t important enough to warrant that many people attacking,” she said, incredulous.

Gisele continued, “I have no idea. All I know is we faced around sixty, including those you killed. The group that attacked us around the wagons was probably their scouts. There is clearly more to the girl than we know. However, we do not know how they gained information about our movements.”

Sloane shook her head. “I don’t even know what to say right now.”

“You can start by telling me why you wished to distract me as we were about to be attacked,” Ismeld demanded as she approached, a scowl set deep on her face.

Sloane took a deep breath before answering. “I wanted to give you something I crafted for you, Ismeld,” she admitted. “I thought it could help you in the fight, but I realize now that it was an inopportune time.”

Ismeld's expression softened. “I see,” she said. “It was a good thought, Sloane, but we must remain focused during battle. Never mind that I would have been ill-trained in its operation.”

“Understood,” Sloane said, feeling embarrassed about her own overexcitement.

Gisele shook her head as the other three knights approached. Nemura moved away to speak with Stefan as Tiberius flew in and landed on the big telv woman’s shoulder.

“Let’s gather what we can, then get to Swanbrook. I am sure they will be interested in what happened here,” the Knight-Captain decided.

Sloane glanced around. “How far away are we?”

“We will arrive within a few hours,” Gisele replied.

I’m not looking forward to this.



As Sloane and the others drew closer to Swanbrook, she managed to catch a picturesque sight of their destination as she sat with Nemura, the telv driving the wagon as they followed the knights' own. She couldn't help but marvel at the view of the sprawling city built around a large harbor.

The harbor was guarded by a massive sea wall, towering high above the water, blocking off any unauthorized entry. The gate was made of thick iron bars, rusted with age, and covered in barnacles and seaweed, giving it a foreboding and intimidating appearance. The wall itself was made of solid blocks of stone that were adorned with intricate carvings depicting sea creatures and nautical scenes. Inside, the harbor was teeming with ships of all sizes, from bulky trading vessels to sturdy-looking fishing boats with high sides and reinforced hulls, clearly designed to withstand rough waters. The city itself was a maze of gray stone buildings, huddled together like a swarm of bees.

The walls surrounding the city were made of the same large stone blocks as the sea wall, their formidable presence a testament to the city's past as a fortress against raiders and invaders. However, they lacked the grandeur and imposing height of the walls of Marketbol. As they approached the gates, Sloane could see the guards standing with pikes waiting for visitors, stopping each person to inspect their goods and collect entry fees. Despite the toll, there was a constant stream of people and goods entering and exiting the city, evidence of the bustling trade that kept the city alive.

She caught sight of Gisele handling the entrance negotiation for both wagons, and soon the group was making their way to an inn that Cristole knew about near the port.

The two wagons navigated through the bustling city streets, dodging carts and vendors hawking their wares. The air was thick with the scent of spices, saltwater, and horse dung. They passed by towering warehouses and busy docks where ships of all sizes unloaded goods from far-off lands. The constant noise of merchants haggling and vendors calling out their goods filled the air, making it difficult to hear one's own thoughts. Eventually, they made it to the inn, and despite only just arriving, she was already grateful for a moment of respite from the chaotic city.

The establishment was a quaint two-story building with a thatched roof, nestled between larger and more imposing structures. Its wooden exterior was painted a warm shade of brown, and the windows had colorful shutters that added a touch of cheerfulness to the otherwise somber surroundings.

Nemura glanced at Sloane as they came to a stop in front of it. "I'll take the wagon around. See you inside?"

"Sounds good!" Sloane said before she hopped down from the bench.

Stefan exited the wagon with Mariel, helping the young girl disembark. Sloane had asked the man to stay inside in case they were attacked again.

The copper-haired telv got the wagon moving again and directed the horses to follow behind the other wagon.

Mariel and Stefan joined her as they walked into the inn where Ismeld, Cristole, and Deryk stood.

The high elf man turned and greeted them. "We obtained rooms for the night with the option of longer. There won't be any time tonight to find out any information about ships departing," he explained. "And we are quite hungry, what about the four of you?"

"I could eat, I am sure the others could as well," Sloane said with a nod. She turned toward the raithe girl. "Are you hungry, Mariel?"

The priestess-in-training nodded. "I am, milady."

"Good. Let's get some food." She looked over at Ismeld. "I think this is a more appropriate setting to give you your present, as well."

The woman rolled her eyes. "It is indeed," she said before falling into step beside Sloane as the group made its way into the tavern area. "I apologize for snapping at you," Ismeld said softly.

"You were right to do so. I apologize as well," Sloane said.

As the group walked into the bustling tavern, the sounds of lively chatter and clinking glasses filled the air. They scanned the room for a place to sit and eventually made their way over to the sole long table that was still unoccupied. The atmosphere was lively and boisterous, with patrons laughing and chatting in groups around them. They settled into their seats, and two friendly barmaids promptly arrived to take their orders.

Ismeld and Mariel sat on either side of Sloane, while Stefan and Cristole immediately placed food orders for their missing comrades. Deryk quickly started ordering ales for the group with the other woman.

"So, Sloane," Ismeld said, gaining the terran's attention. "What is this present?"

Sloane turned to face Ismeld, her mind briefly distracted from the liveliness of the tavern. She pulled out a small package from her bag and placed it on the table in front of her.

"It's just a little something I thought you might find useful," Sloane explained, giving Ismeld a small smile.

She started opening the package. "I have thought a lot about a way to give you the ability to use magic. You have your gauntlet," Sloane said, pointing at the woman's left hand. "Not to mention the other enchantments in your sword and armor."

The elf nodded in gratitude. “And I appreciate all you have done,” she said, gesturing to her gauntlet adorned with the **[Spell Buckler]** enchantment. “The shield alone is a great boon.”

Sloane smiled. That spell had been something Gisele had come up with back in Marketbol. Devising it into runic form had been interesting, especially because of the massive mana draw that was required to actually stop physical attacks. Sloane had settled on using a system of mana crystals that worked almost like the battery pack to an electric car. They were small, and they definitely added to the bulk of the gauntlet—the thing noticeably larger than the one she wore on her right.

Another series of opals, diamonds, and sapphires set *inside* the gauntlet helped connect the device to Ismeld, allowing the runic spell to draw mana through her core.

It was complex, but it meant that the gauntlet would have essentially no recurring upkeep required.

In Sloane’s opinion, if items had rarities like roleplaying games back home, the gauntlet would surely be an epic quality, contrasted to Tiberius’s legendary rarity, of course.

Although, cores do have a quality... maybe the system recognizes the same for items somehow.

As she pulled the caster from the package, Sloane considered the gun to also be of epic rarity.

Ismeld’s eyes went wide as she assessed the item, likely connecting the shape with the descriptions Sloane had made of guns before.

“You said during the battle that this can cast **Mana Bolts**?” Ismeld said, almost in awe.

Sloane nodded. “Sort of. It will cast the runic version of **[Mana Bolt]**. Once per spell cartridge.” She pulled out a couple of cartridges to show Ismeld. “These are spell cartridges. You have two different types. If you recall, the **Arcane Lance** spell that I made with you in mind? Well, you have some **[Arcane Lance]** cartridges—again, which is the runic version of the spell. This means its strength is based primarily on the weapon itself instead of solely on your core and attunements. Now, let me show you how this works...”

Ismeld observed with curiosity and interest as Sloane passionately explained the inner workings of the caster. The elf’s enthusiasm was unmistakable as Sloane showcased the different features and mechanics of the device and the spell cartridges—such as their ability to recharge. Just a look at the high elf’s face and it was clear how impressed the woman was. Even her normally utilitarian sensibilities were put on hold as the Blightwych Lady inside of her returned from its hiding to marvel at the intricate design of the caster.

“Truly, this is a gift worthy of any Lady,” the blonde said, her eyes brimming with gratitude. Sloane felt a warm sense of contentment spread through her as she looked upon her friend's elated expression.

“You are most welcome, my friend,” Sloane replied, smiling. “I am going to miss you, despite the gruff exterior you like to maintain.”

At this, the woman chuckled, shaking her head. “Some of us have images to maintain.”

Sloane laughed along with her. “Don't worry, I won't tell anyone you're a softie at heart.”

Sloane couldn't help but notice the woman's smile widen, and a touch of mirthful defiance glinting in her eyes. It was as if she was basking in the friendly exchange, but with an almost regretful air. Like she had just discovered something dear, only to realize that she was about to lose it.

As Sloane guided her conversation with Ismeld back to the caster, Gisele, Maud, and Nemura joined the group at the table, looking relieved to relax and eat.

Deryk called out and the barmaids promptly served everyone their food, and the group began to eat heartily, enjoying each other's company as they savored the delicious, warm fare. The lively atmosphere of the tavern provided a brief respite, but Sloane knew that they would soon have to part ways and continue their respective journeys. For now, she was content to savor this moment of camaraderie before the time would come to face the inevitable challenges ahead.

Especially if that fight is indicative of what I have to protect Mariel from.

She stole a glance between Nemura and Stefan. Her two guards were capable, very much so, but she wasn't sure how the three of them would fare against an attack like they'd weathered just that day without the knights.

We're going to need to be less conspicuous. Somehow.

Luckily, most of their trip would be by ship.