

Establishing Direction

“And here is the key,” Elodie said as she held out one large iron skeleton key that had strange cross-shaped bits to it attached to an entire ring filled with more, smaller keys. *Right. No standardization.* The large double gate was open and everyone was waiting for them to give the word to enter the campus.

Adaega took the ring, turning the keys over in her hand, and then glanced up at the woman. “What am I supposed to do with these?”

Elodie’s eyes went wide. “Did... did your world not have keys?”

For some reason, Ernald thought that was the funniest thing in the world, or at least he must have if his booming laughter was any indication.

Adaega’s unamused stare was enough to get him to start coughing. She handed it to Ernald. “Here, as the Head of Security, it is your job to hold onto the keys.”

The man sighed but nodded.

Adaega smiled and turned back toward everyone. “Alright! Let’s get everything in! Bring the wagons and the horses into the courtyard. I will show the heads of each department where their buildings are so that they can move everything to the correct location. There are stables to the side that the horses can be housed in when we are done.”

Ernald coughed. “Adaega? There are three of them, plus the guards. We can just bring them plus Guardsman Gregor.”

Stefan snickered from where he leaned against the wagon.

Adaega put on a strained smile. “Right. Yes. Let’s go.”

Ernald turned and addressed the guards, having them start patrolling the grounds to get familiar with it and pointing out a couple that would remain with the horses and wagons. He also had the other senior guardsman take charge of posting guards at key locations, such as entrances.

He turned and clapped. “Ready!”

Adaega nodded curtly before spinning on her heel and leading the way inside.

She and Elodie guided the group as they showed them around the campus. The area itself was two hundred and ten meters wide but only had a width of about eighty to ninety. It was quite large and far larger than what she had imagined they could afford.

The first stop was the main facility with its U-shaped structure. It was the largest structure on the grounds, and only larger than the auditorium because of its height. The third largest structure on the campus was what used to be a small temple to the minor god Erbium. They were still debating what to convert it into that didn’t anger the gods. Her initial thought was that it would form the basis of what she was calling the Runic Hall. *A temple to the god of crafting would likely have something crafting-worthy in it... right?*

Adaega was able to show Ernard where her office would be, and she had to admit that it was nice. Much better than the office she had as the Director of Operations for the Lokoja University. *I will probably end up sleeping in here a lot.*

Next, she pointed out the various offices, such as where Elodie would work until she got the second location up and running, that is, the one that would host the headquarters for the Runecard business.

Adaega still needed to meet with the headmaster of the school, but one of the conditions for the sale was that commercial business would be conducted off-site. Which just meant that they would fabricate everything here, and transport it elsewhere.

Once they were done showing off the main facility, they moved on to the other two key locations. They walked out of the doors at the rear of the building and moved to the right. Here lay another large building, one that would form two different functions. It was the Alchemy Hall and would also have dedicated areas for the fabrication of magical items and gadgets.

When Kemmy and Rel saw the inside, their eyes went wide.

“This... is all for us?” Rel asked.

“Mostly. Eventually, you will need apprentices and other alchemists to work with you, however, you two are in charge.”

Rel's wide brown eyes turned to fear. "Nope. No, I am not. Kemmy is in charge."

Adaega tilted her head in confusion. That was not what she was expecting.

The diminutive Kemmy patted the big orkun woman on her dark green arm. "It's alright, hon." She looked between Adaega and Elodie. "Don't worry, boss. This was the deal Lady Sloane and I worked out. I'll run it, Rel will help me. She's the best assistant any gal could ask for."

Adaega didn't think the orkun could blush any harder if she tried.

It made Adaega smile, and pass a glance at Ernard. The beautiful dunce unfortunately didn't recognize the underlying subtleties of the moment. It was something that would have been persecuted back home in *merry, old* Yoruba, but it seemed that here, love was love. *As it should be.*

"Grab some of the guards and start moving your supplies here. We'll send more to help you as we can, alright? Is that okay, Ernard?"

"What? Oh, yes. Just grab anyone you see. They know to assist."

The two women nodded and almost skipped to the front of the grounds.

Adaega led everyone down the path to the following two facilities. The first was one of the smaller structures, but it would be a manageable size because the structure just past it was massive. At least it was for the purpose it held.

Koren whistled. "Now, *this* is nice. The Smithing Hall is adequately sized, but that foundry... is beautiful. I will go grab the wagon."

"You do not wish for us to show it to you?" Elodie asked.

The smith laughed. "I just needed you to point me in the right direction, but I appreciate the tour. At least now I know where to find either of you if I need you. I will look as I start bringing things inside."

Adaega chuckled. "Very well. Thank you, Koren."

The man nodded and started walking away. Adaega looked around at the last few people with her. Stefan was seemingly bored, but Gregor stood with stoic professionalism that she could appreciate. *Good, and he's the one remaining behind when Lady Reinhart leaves.*

“Now, let us show you the last few areas that are important for today. The Guard Hall, or at least what we will convert into such, the training pad, and the dormitories,” she said as she started to walk back in the direction they had come from.

The tall structure she had chosen as the guard hall was by itself, set back up against the wall with a large stone pad that had as much area as the building itself next to it. The guard hall was a fortified facility, and she would not be surprised if in ages past it had filled the same function at one point.

Senior Guardsman Gregor called out to several of the guards and went to retrieve the other senior guardsman to determine what would be needed within the hall. She knew that there was ample room for an armory, offices, more training rooms, and even space for a decent amount of the guardsmen to live there.

As the telv walked away, she looked at Ernald. “Well, that’s just about everyone. Do you think they will like it?”

The knight smiled and shook his head. “Adaega, are you joking?” He gestured around. “This is *amazing*. We don’t have nearly enough people. Especially guards. I will need to use my list. I take it my office is in the Guard Hall?”

Adaega nodded. “Yes. Elodie and I are going to start hiring key positions, then empower them to hire more. Feel free to hire what you need to protect the campus.”

The man nodded, seemingly lost in thought. He looked up and squinted. “How are we affording this? I know Sloane is making, quite frankly, an absurd amount of coin from her venture with the dwarves, but that *has* to be dried up by now?”

Elodie nodded. “Lady Sloane has indeed utilized nearly all of the funds from what we had access to since leaving Thirdghyll. However, my uncle foresaw this and invested in the center himself as per his deal with Lady Sloane, which gave me access to a specific amount of funding here through the Banking Guild. Further, we have received an advance from the Banking Guild to procure what we need to establish the Runecard business.’

Adaega smiled. “See? Elodie here has *everything* under control.”

“I trust you two. I just hope that using everyone else’s coin is not going to harm Sloane’s interests.”

Elodie chuckled. “As soon as the Banking Guild’s updates from Vilstaf arrive we will be doing fine. The Farum Siblings had expanded their business even further with everyone arriving from Thirdghyll. That followed by more designs sent from Lady Sloane has boosted their business considerably. Further, the Lady is expected to have more profits come in from the Smithing Guild, a deal that I will expand upon here in Marketbol after we find an esquire.”

Stefan whistled and shook his head. “That woman arrived with *nothing* and she already has enough to make several merchant houses quail.”

“She is quite perceptive to trends and key markets,” Elodie agreed.

The raithe chuckled. “I think it is more that she is quite adept at finding quality minions.”

No one had a response to that.

Instead, Adaega directed them down the path to continue and finish up the tour.

They passed by the large stone pad. While Adaega wasn’t sure what the pad was originally utilized for, she knew the small House Guard could make full use of it. She could already see Ernald and the knights training on it as soon as possible. With the high walls surrounding the campus, it would provide the perfect amount of privacy.

She glanced over to see what the sun elf thought, noticing that Ernald already seemed to be humming in thought. Adaega smiled at the sight of Stefan shaking his head next to him. *That’s right, they train hard.*

She recalled the view of Ernald after one such training session, with no shirt on... sweaty... Adaega felt her cheeks heat up. *Not the time!*

Beyond that in the opposite corner of Guard Hall was a structure that housed both the stables and storage areas.

Then finally back toward the entrance of the campus sat the dormitories. It was a large three-story structure that could provide room and board for up to two hundred and fifty. There was a large dining area with an attached kitchen on the ground floor which would need to be staffed.

All-in-all, Adaega was quite satisfied with the campus. The two men excused themselves to go help get things set up, Stefan promising to take her and Elodie to meet with the esquire he knew the next day. Koren was already directing the wagon with all of his smithing supplies down the path that led to his area, while Kemmy and Rel already had relocated the other wagon with their alchemy materials.

Adaega shared a glance with the sun elf woman standing with her back at the entrance to the Center. They had a lot of work to do.

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“Thank you for seeing us with such short notice, milady,” Elodie said. The woman standing with her hands crossed in front of her as they stood from the chairs they had been waiting in. Elodie mentioned the esquires were considered low nobles, which is what allowed them to represent the interests of commoners *against* nobles.

The esquire, a raithe woman with teal hair, wore an impeccably styled black dress with teal designs that made her lavender-colored skin pop. The woman’s gaze took in her visitors and she smiled to both Elodie and Adaega in turn before laying the deepest scowl that Adaega had ever seen upon Stefan.

“Stefan Stranca.”

The raithe man had the courtesy to look sheepish.

“Hey, Nadia,” he said, with only the slightest hitch in his otherwise suave voice.

The woman took a step forward and poked him in the chest.

“Seventeen weeks, Stefan.” That was the first time Adaega had heard the way a native spoke of the calendar system since arriving, she had to say... she didn’t like it.

Stefan seemed confused and rubbed at his chest. “Seventeen weeks?”

The woman let out an overly dramatic sigh before glancing between Elodie and Adaega. “I hope neither of you is sleeping with him.”

Elodie sputtered. “N-No! We’re in the same House. He works for our Lady as we do.”

Adaega figured she’d throw the man a bone. “He mentioned he knew the best esquire in the city, and that we may be able to find assistance here.”

The raithe almost kept his surprise hidden. Unfortunately for him, the esquire noticed. She snorted in a most unladylike way. “I could see him saying that. I am the *best* esquire in the city, Stefan?”

The man nodded quickly. “Absolutely. When they mentioned needing one, you were the only one on my mind.”

The woman gave Adaega a questioning look. Adaega shrugged. “I cannot attest to his mind, but you *were* the only contact he spoke of.”

The woman nodded. “And now you have attached yourself to a House?” She shook her head. “What happened? Who did you get yourself in debt to? Was it the Forsom family?”

Adaega raised a brow as she observed the woman speak to Stefan.

“No one—”

“It will be alright, Stefan. I will file with the court, how much do you need? I will not have you beholden to some noble,” she continued.

“I am not beholden—” *This is hilarious.*

“Stefan. Stop dithering. I did not agree with you joining the guilds in... *that* capacity, but I could understand it. But now it’s been seventeen weeks since you last visited. I am disappointed in you.” *Did they... did he? That scoundrel...*

Stefan threw up his hands. “Look, Nads! I *chose* to join the House. It was an assignment to protect Elodie Romaris here, but then we started working with the woman and she has grand ideas and is going to change the world. Elodie is taking over some of Sloane’s business here and I will be going with her. The woman needs help, Nads, her daughter is missing and I can help her. So stop... just stop. Alright? I am fine. Mother would be proud this time.”

Adaega’s mind went blank. *Mother?*

The woman’s face softened. “Oh, little brother of mine.” She sighed, pausing in thought, then tilted her head. “Are you sure?” *Oooh. That makes more sense.*

Stefan nodded. “I am. There is more that I cannot tell you, but... trust me. She’s important.”

The raithe woman gave Stefan a sad smile. “Are you *sure*? You know I can—”

“I am sure, Nads,” he said definitively.

Adaega felt her heart filling at the scene, it made her long for her own siblings back home. *I hope they are okay.*

Stefan’s sister nodded. “And it’s *Lady* Sloane. What is she? Wait... you better not be sleeping with *her*.”

Adaega huffed a laugh at the shocked expression on Stefan’s face. Elodie stared between the two wide-eyed as if she didn’t know whether she wanted to talk or to run away.

“No, he is not. Baroness Reinhart is simply informal with those within her circle,” Adaega chimed in.

The woman turned and looked at Adaega with an expression that said she was seeing her fully for the first time. “You are a terran.”

“I am. As is the Lady.”

The woman let out another sigh. “Shit. Stefan... Everyone come into my office.”

Adaega smirked at the raithe as they followed the motherly older sister into the office at the rear of the room. Inside was sparsely decorated, with a full bookcase and a small table to the

right, and a tiny liquor cabinet set up to the left side; the four full bottles of clear liquid made it seem more decorative than something actually utilized.

Nadia walked to her desk, turned around, and leaned against it. “Stefan, be a dear and pour us all a glass.” *Or it was simply freshly stocked.*

The man nodded and walked to the liquor cabinet, and took out a bottle and glasses. He looked over at his sister as he started pouring. “So, are you going to help us?”

Nadia sighed again. “I am not joining your House, and what you need is a House esquire.”

Stefan opened his mouth, but she held her hand up. “I will work *with* you until you get one. I will even assist you in finding someone suitable. I have a few names that may be up for the option. I assume you are here because you need esquire services, now?”

Adaega nodded. “Yes. We just purchased the old campus in the scholar’s district and—”

Nadia’s eyes widened. “They actually sold it? That has been sitting there for ten years since they closed it. How did you convince them of that?”

“We had a recommendation from Grandmaster Markus and Lady Emerys,” Elodie said. *That is news to me, but it makes sense.*

The raithe woman took the glass that Stefan proffered and raised it. “That will do it. I still imagine it was quite expensive.”

Elodie huffed a laugh as she too accepted a glass of clear liquid. “We managed to purchase it at a *very* good price. The Romaris family believes this will be a *very* profitable venture.”

Nadia raised a brow and looked at her brother who was handing Adaega hers before upending his own glass completely. “You did mention she was a Romaris. Interesting.”

Elodie nodded. “Yes. I have joined House Reinhart myself, and my uncle holds Lady Reinhart in high esteem. Even more so, now.”

The woman narrowed her eyes. “Now?”

Stefan grabbed the bottle next to him and instead of pouring a glass, drank straight from it. “Well, Nads... Thirdghyll is gone. Lady Sloane’s warning saved the Guilds, and now we’ll be soon leaving for Avira.”

“W-What?! Thirdghyll is *gone*? What does that even mean?”

Adaega sighed.

“Monsters attacked and wiped it out. The Order of Secrets set it up that way, somehow. Look, sis, we could really use your help. We won’t be able to leave before the siege gets lifted but—”

“Siege? What siege?”

Adaega groaned. *Clearly, they haven’t told everyone yet. Good job, Stefan.*

Stefan looked sheepish again. “Oh... Well, the Vlaredian Army is on its way here, and Mogogale was completely unprepared to send an army to help the city. That and the Marketbol Army is much too far to turn around or even get word until after.”

Nadia’s shocked expression wasn’t really a surprise. The woman’s head twitched, and she narrowed her eyes. “The city is going to be attacked... and you are here doing *business*?”

She upended her own drink but then turned her scowl on all three of them.

“What the *fuck*?”