

The Blacksmith: Part 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.