

Dimming Light

Sloane and Nemura were marched down a narrow, dimly lit hallway, their hands tightly manacled in front of them. The oppressive air was damp and musty, and the rhythmic drips of water added a haunting cadence to their every step. Sloane strained to hear beyond the jangling of the guards' armor, hoping to catch any sound that could provide insight into their location. The muted voices of other prisoners carried through the winding passages, taunting her with fragments of their conversation.

Despite the discomfort of her bound hands, Sloane kept her head held high and her expression neutral. She couldn't afford to show any weakness or fear in front of the guards. Nemura walked beside her, her own face set in a grim mask of determination.

Finally, they arrived at a large iron door, and one of the guards produced a set of keys to unlock it. The door creaked open, and Sloane and Nemura were led into a dimly lit antechamber with cells along the left and right walls.

A tall man and high elf woman stood beside a table, a sack sitting open and ready between them. The man scowled as they approached.

“What have we here,” he sneered, eyeing Sloane and Nemura with contempt. “A couple of murderers, it seems.”

The guards that escorted them removed their manacles before placing the things they'd already taken onto the table. Sloane rubbed her wrists as the man examined their belongings. He gestured to the sack. “Strip down completely and place everything in the sack.”

Sloane's eyes narrowed. “I am not stripping down in front of you.”

She was shoved from behind by one of the guards. “You don't give orders here. Strip.”

Sloane felt her blood boil with anger at the guard's disrespectful shove. She straightened her back, and her eyes narrowed into thin slits as she met his gaze. Her lips twisted into a sneer, revealing a flash of teeth.

“I said I am not stripping down in front of you,” she spat out, her voice thick with barely contained rage.

The guard's face twisted in a mocking grin. “Oh, what's the matter? Scared we'll see your pretty little body?”

Sloane felt her cheeks heat up, and her grip on her mana intensified. She drew on the power around her, feeling it flow into her channels and electrify her entire being. Four **[Mana Bolts]** appeared above her shoulders, flickering with purple arcane energy that illuminated the dimly lit chamber.

Her eyes glowed and crackled with an otherworldly fury as she met the guard's gaze once more. "I suggest you back off," she growled, her voice laced with menace. "I have been cooperative, but if you force me, I will defend myself."

The guard took a step back, his face pale with fear. The woman sighed and gestured towards the sack. "Just put your stuff in there, then," she mumbled, her voice barely audible over the sound of Sloane's mana crackling in the air

Sloane narrowed her eyes in triumph and turned toward the table. She looked for her runic sword, only to find it missing.

"Where is my sword?" she demanded, turning towards the guards once more.

The second guard, a larger telv next to Nemura, smiled. "You may have him scared, but your little trick doesn't scare me. You had no sword. So—"

The man's nose erupted in blood as Nemura headbutted him.

Sloane couldn't help but smirk as she watched Nemura take down the guard. The sound of his nose breaking echoed through the room, and the other guards drew their weapons. Sloane took a step forward, her Mana Bolts still hovering over her shoulders. "I suggest you return our weapons before things get messy," she said, her voice cold and threatening.

The telv man who had been examining their belongings stepped forward. "You two are in no position to make demands," he spat. "You're lucky we haven't thrown you in a cell already."

Sloane's eyes flicked to the sack on the table. "Our belongings," she repeated, preparing an **[Arcane Lance]**. "Or there will be consequences."

The man hesitated, and Sloane could see the fear in his eyes. She knew she had the upper hand, and she wasn't going to let them take advantage of her and Nemura any longer. Finally, the man motioned to the guard next to her.

"Where's her sword?" he demanded.

The guard's eyes widened. "H-He left it in the wagon."

"Well get it!" the man shouted. "Now!"

While the man ran off, Sloane and Nemura began to remove their armor and other belongings that they still had. Sloane hesitated at her wrist, but the high elf woman caught her. "The bracelet too."

"If this goes missing, I will burn the city down," Sloane said evenly. She was already tired of the city and tired of being waylaid. They needed to leave, and they only had four days before the ship left.

They could not get stuck here.

The woman nodded. "I will ensure it does not then."

Sloane slowly removed her watch and held it out to the woman. Her eyes narrowed. "I will trust you, but do not forget what you promised."

The woman hesitated, but then nodded and grabbed the watch.

As they finished gathering their things, the other guard returned, holding onto her sword, and quickly placed it on the table with everything else.

Sloane turned to the telv man once more. "If anything is missing or damaged, there will be problems," she warned, her eyes still filled with arcane energy.

The man just sneered in response, but Sloane could see the hint of fear still present in his expression. She let her magic dissipate and glanced at Nemura. The woman nodded, she was clearly just as determined to get out of this jail as Sloane was.

"Over here," the high elf woman said with a gesture to one of the cells. "You will get two meals per day, the bucket will be replaced at the end of each day. Do not cause any issues. Your trial will be determined tomorrow."

Sloane and Nemura were shoved into the small cell, and the heavy iron door slammed shut behind them.

Her heart sank as she looked around the cramped cell, the walls damp and the air thick with a stale odor. She leaned against the wall, rubbed a hand through her hair, and sighed.

"Well, shit," Sloane sighed, the weight of the situation settling heavily on her shoulders.

Nemura scanned the cell, her eyes thoughtful. "We just need to last until tomorrow. If all else fails, you have your magic."

Sloane pushed off of the wall and began pacing the cell, her mind racing. Stefan was out there with Mariel, surely the man would be working something out.

"Relax, there is nothing we can do right now. Stefan is resourceful. He'll figure it out," Nemura said as if reading Sloane's mind.

She could only groan in response.

Four days.



The final bell of the day sounded in the distance.

Stefan glanced around the spacious office that he and Mariel were in and couldn't help but find the decor in the Guildmaster's office to be quite unique. The room was spacious and filled with all sorts of odd trinkets and artifacts. The walls were lined with shelves that were packed with books, scrolls, and various other items that Stefan

couldn't quite identify. The desk in the center of the room was large and ornate, with intricate carvings adorning its surface. The chairs were plush and comfortable, with elaborate embroidery and gold trimmings.

The Guildmaster, a stern-looking telv with piercing blue eyes, sat behind the desk and regarded them both with a cool detachment.

“I’ve heard some concerning things, Mister Stranca.”

Stefan sat up straighter in his chair, trying to convey an air of professionalism despite the sweat on his brow. Mariel sat next to Stefan, the thirteen-year-old trying to make herself seem small as the two men talked.

“What is that, Guildmaster?” he asked.

“A terran noble has been arrested, which is interesting in itself,” the Guildmaster began, his tone cool and detached. “I received word that Lady Reinhart would pass through our fair city some time ago from my friend, Guildmaster Romaris. My understanding was that you were only contracted to guard Lanthil’s niece and the lady on their way to Marketbol, yet here you are having joined the terran’s House.”

Stefan nodded. “Yes, that was the original agreement. However, circumstances changed. Lady Reinhart has proven to be a positive force, one that will benefit the Guilds.”

The Guildmaster raised an eyebrow skeptically. “And how exactly is that?”

Stefan hesitated, trying to come up with a convincing argument. “Lady Reinhart has knowledge and skills that can be of great use to us. The Banking Guild, alone, will not wish to see her harmed.”

The Guildmaster leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers together in front of him. “I see. And what of the accusations against her? Do you deny them? Mind you, I have it on good authority that you were involved.”

Stefan took a deep breath. “I cannot deny that we were involved, Guildmaster,” Stefan admitted. “But the situation is not as straightforward as it may seem. I am unsure how the Guard was made aware, and what information they were given, but we did not kill the paladin. We were meeting him there regarding a situation within the Church.”

The Guildmaster raised a brow but did not reply. Stefan continued, “We found the paladin dead when we arrived, and we were then attacked by people who oppose the Church. They were the ones that set a trap for us, so we defended ourselves.”

Guildmaster Cross’s expression remained impassive as he listened to Stefan’s explanation. Mariel shifted nervously in her seat beside Stefan, and he reached over to place a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“We need your help, Guildmaster,” Stefan said. “To keep Mariel safe while I work to clear Lady Reinhart’s name and get her out of jail. It is in the best interest of the guilds.”

The Guildmaster drummed his fingers on the desk for a moment, considering Stefan's words. Finally, he spoke.

"Very well. I will see what I can do to help you, if only out of my friendship with Lanthil. But you must understand, Mister Stranca, the Blades Guild cannot directly interfere with the city's *leadership*. We are a guild that works in the shadows. You need a way to bring your plight into the light."

Stefan nodded. "I appreciate your help, Guildmaster."

The Guildmaster tapped on his desk, signaling the end of the meeting and the three of them stood. "I will make arrangements for Mariel's safety, and I will see what I can do to help with Lady Reinhart's release. In the meantime, you should look for Evocati Yemina. That is if she is not already dead."

The Blade shared a glance with the priestess, and he could see the weight of everything bearing down on the young girl.

"I will do that, Guildmaster."

The man nodded. "Good, now," he said as he reached into his desk and pulled out a small scroll. "Go here. Make sure you are not followed. Two Blades will arrive. They will repeat the phrase written on that scroll. If they do not repeat it verbatim, something is wrong."

"Understood. Thank you, Guildmaster."

Stefan took the scroll and quickly committed its contents to memory before he tucked it safely into his pocket. Mariel followed him out of the office and they made their way through the Blade's Guild headquarters to the exit. As they stepped outside into the fading daylight, Stefan turned to Mariel.

"Stay close to me," he said. "We need to be cautious from now on."

Mariel nodded, her eyes wide with worry. Stefan took her hand and they began to make their way through the busy streets of the city. They passed by merchants and travelers, guards and beggars, all oblivious to the danger that lurked in the shadows.

Stefan scanned the faces around them, searching for any signs of danger. Mariel clung to his hand, her eyes darting around nervously. They moved quickly, trying to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Finally, they arrived at the location the Guildmaster had given them. It was a narrow alley between two buildings, dimly lit and empty.

Stefan looked around but saw no one. He pulled out the scroll and read the phrase aloud. There was a moment of silence, and then he heard a voice from behind him, speaking in the language of the moon elves.

"Al ta ella mestar." The fox hunts alone.

“But the wolf hunts in a pack,” he replied. Stefan turned to see two Blades standing behind him, their faces obscured by their hoods.

He relaxed slightly, knowing that they were there to help.

“Follow us,” one of them said, a woman, and they turned and disappeared into the shadows. Stefan and Mariel followed, their hearts racing with anticipation.



Yemina looked down at the body of Fynn, a young vicori of the order. His remains lay on a stone table within the temple, the two city guardsmen who had delivered him standing quietly nearby. Yemina's heart sank at the sight of the lifeless body. Fynn had been a promising young vicori, eager to serve the Church and bring light to the world.

And now he was dead, another casualty in whatever shadow war was claiming the lives of her brothers and sisters in Alos.

The worst part was, she had no way to call for help.

Praetor Moren was missing, and presumed dead. The man and his squad were ambushed on the way to visit a nearby town to deal with a reported monster sighting. She'd been unable to locate any of them since, and the scene itself had been littered with bits of broken armor, blood, and bones. All scattered as if to seem like a monster attack at first glance, but she suspected otherwise. Especially, since the amount wasn't enough to account for the Praetor and the four members of his squad.

The man had even made sure to take extra men because of a monster attack that had claimed the lives of an evocati and his vicori trainee several weeks prior.

Then there was the fact that the Temple Guards were likely compromised. She wasn't sure how, or why, but it appeared that several priests were ordering clandestine operations. But she had even less evidence of that theory.

She didn't think she'd find it. Nothing added up, but she knew one thing.

As the last surviving paladin in the city where it appeared they were being targeted, she knew it was only a matter of time before whoever was behind this came for her.

She knelt beside the table and closed her eyes, offering a prayer for the young man's soul.

When she opened them again, she looked up at the guards.

“Are these all of his effects?” she asked, gesturing toward the small sack they had brought.

The guard on the left shifted uncomfortably. “We believe so, ma'am. But we don't know whether his killers took anything.”

Yemina sighed as she scrutinized the vicori's face. His youthful features were peaceful even in death.

"And the killer?" she asked levelly.

"We caught one of them, ma'am," the guard on the right answered. "A Terran noblewoman. She's being held in the city's prison."

"And the others?" Yemina pressed.

"There was only one other. We're still searching for him," the guard replied. "But we believe he is still within the city. We've sent out patrols to try and find him."

Yemina nodded.

"Thank you again, guardsmen."

The two men nodded and saluted before making their way out of the temple. A priest entered the room after they left, the telv man's eyes focusing on Fynn's body.

"We will prepare his body, Evocati," the man said.

Yemina placed a hand on the priest's shoulder. "Thank you. Take care of him, send him off to Relena at his best."

The man nodded. "We will, Evocati. Be safe."

She gave him a weak smile. "Alos Protects."

As she left the temple, Yemina couldn't shake off the feeling that something wasn't adding up.

Before the guards and Fynn's body had even arrived, she'd already inquired with a contact in the City Guard. They had only known about the attack after receiving a tip from a passerby. They had no true evidence other than verbal testimony that the terran woman had even been there.

She glanced up at the dark sky, wondering what else she could do to uncover the truth. The city was full of secrets and lies, and she knew she needed more information before she could take any action. She decided to head to the scene of the attack in Emerald Groves Park, hoping that it might provide some insight into what was happening.

As she made her way through the dark streets, Yemina couldn't help but feel a sense of unease. She was alone and vulnerable, and she knew there were people out there who wanted her dead.

Yemina walked through the deserted streets, her footsteps echoing against the stone walls, her red armor reflecting the lamps as she passed them. She kept a hand on the hilt of her sword, alert for any signs of danger. The only sounds she heard were the distant howls of stray dogs and the rustling of leaves in the night breeze.

Finally, she arrived at the entrance of Emerald Groves Park. The wrought iron gates were closed and locked, but she easily scaled the wall and dropped down to the

other side. The park was eerily quiet, with no sign of life except for the occasional rustling in the bushes. Yemina cautiously made her way toward the spot where the attack had taken place, her senses on high alert.

She saw the fountain and made her way to the bench where Fynn's body had been found.

Yemina searched the area thoroughly, looking for any evidence that could help her uncover the truth behind the attack. She examined the ground for footprints, checked the bushes for any signs of disturbance, and even searched the nearby trash cans for any discarded items that might be useful. But there was nothing out of the ordinary, and she was left with more questions than answers.

In a moment of exhaustion, Yemina sat down on the bench, feeling the weight of the investigation bearing down on her. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing thoughts.

As she opened her eyes, she noticed a small piece of paper stuck under the bench. She reached down and pulled it out, her eyes widening as she recognized the handwriting. It was Fynn's.

The note read, *'Mt trn. grl key.'*

Her eyes widened. She quickly realized that the note was a message from Fynn to her.

Yemina furrowed her brow as she read the note again, trying to make sense of the jumbled letters. After a moment, the meaning finally clicked into place and she understood what Fynn was trying to tell her. She realized that the key to whatever was going on and to uncovering the truth was the terran and some girl.

Yemina sprang to her feet, her gaze darting around for any signs of danger before she quickly stowed the note in a small pouch on her belt.

She had no idea who 'the girl' could be, but it was a lead that she couldn't ignore. She quickly left the park, her mind racing with possibilities and her heart pounding with adrenaline. She knew that she had to find out who this girl was and why learning that she was key to something got Fynn killed.

Yemina rushed through the deserted streets, her heart pounding with urgency. She had to get to the prison and meet the terran noblewoman, whoever she was before it was too late. She couldn't shake off the feeling that time was running out.

As she turned a corner, Yemina noticed a group of three men following her at a distance. She quickened her pace, her hand instinctively reaching for her sword. The men continued to follow her, their footsteps growing louder. Yemina could sense that they were closing in.

She turned into a narrow alleyway, hoping to lose them. But as she reached the other end, three more men appeared, effectively blocking her path.

Yemina realized that she was trapped.

The glint of steel caught the moonlight as she drew her sword with a swift motion.

If this was her time to die, she'd show them Alos's fury before she breathed her last.



Stefan made his way through the streets at a purposeful pace. His mind was racing as he thought about Mariel's safety, and all he needed to do to help Sloane. He had left the young priestess with the two Blades at a safe house, and he hoped they could keep her hidden until he returned. He couldn't bear the thought of her being caught up in the violence that seemed to be consuming the city.

He needed to find the sole remaining paladin of the city. He had just left the temple, and couldn't find anyone that knew where she was. He had been about to give up when a priest pulled him to the side and whispered to him that Yemina had gone to the park. Stefan knew exactly which park the man meant, and he made his way there as quickly as possible.

As Stefan strode through the streets of Swanbrook, he caught sight of a trail of crimson liquid that led into a narrow alley. Every fiber of his being told him to turn back, but he couldn't ignore the nagging sense that something was amiss. After a moment's hesitation, he gritted his teeth and stepped resolutely into the shadowy passage.

Stefan followed the trail of blood deeper into the alley, he kept himself alert, and on edge. His **[Danger Sense]** was quiet, but he knew that it wasn't perfect. As he turned a corner, he saw a figure in the distance, a woman in red plate armor, barely standing on her feet. She was stumbling and dragging her hand along the wall for support, leaving a smear of blood in her wake.

He rushed forward, seeing that it was a sun elf, and called out to the woman, but she didn't seem to hear him. He reached out to steady her, and she turned to face him, her eyes locking onto his, pain and determination in her expression. The woman reached down for a dagger that sat on her waist.

Stefan jumped back and raised his hands. "Wait! Let me help you."

The woman's eyes narrowed, and she studied Stefan carefully before nodding and relaxing her grip on the dagger. Stefan noticed that her armor was badly damaged, and blood had soaked through the fabric underneath.

"Who did this to you?" Stefan asked as he wrapped his arm around her to help the sun elf walk.

The woman's expression darkened, and she clenched her jaw. "Six men in black hooded armor. Magic users," she said through gritted teeth. "They caught me off guard."

"You got away?" Stefan asked, looking over his shoulder for anyone who could be looking for her.

She shook her head. "They're dead," she said with a wince.

He looked over the woman, recognizing her armor and tabard's appearance. His eyes widened as he looked into the sun elf's eyes. "You're Evocati Yemina."

Yemina nodded weakly, her grip on her dagger loosening as she leaned heavily against Stefan. "Yes," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

Stefan's heart sank at the sight of the revered Evocati in such a state. "We need to get you help," he said firmly, helping her to walk.

Yemina nodded. "Not the temple. Traitors..." she said weakly, and Stefan noticed that her eyes were starting to droop. He knew that they needed to find aid soon, or she might not make it. They continued walking, Stefan keeping a lookout for any danger that might come their way.

I've got to get her to the safe house.

Stefan supported her as they stumbled through the alleyways toward the safe house. The journey was long and grueling, but they eventually made it to the door. Stefan called out for the two Blades to open up, and they quickly let them inside.

Both Blades immediately rushed over to help Stefan get Yemina onto a bed.

Stefan quickly assessed Yemina's injuries and realized they were beyond what he could handle. He needed a surgeon. He turned to the two Blades who had accompanied him to the safe house. "We need to find a surgeon. Now."

One of the Blades nodded and rushed out of the room. The other stayed behind to assist Stefan in keeping Yemina stable. Mariel, who had been sitting in the corner, watched in horror as Stefan tended to Yemina's wounds. He could tell that she wanted to help but knew there was nothing she could do. Instead, she sat there, eyes closed as she silently prayed to the gods.



Sloane woke up with a start as the sound of heavy banging echoed through the small cell. Her head throbbed, and she groaned, trying to sit up. As she rubbed her temples, she looked around the cramped room, taking in the rusted iron bars, the stained walls, and the dirty floor. She remembered the events of the night before with a sinking feeling in her stomach.

Beside her, Nemura was awake, sitting at the edge of the only bed in the cell.

“What's going on?” Sloane muttered, rubbing her eyes.

Before Nemura could respond, the door creaked open, and a guard stepped in, his armor clanging against the stone. “Get up,” he growled, his expression grim. “You’re expected by the Justicar.”

Sloane and Nemura got up slowly, their muscles sore and their bodies exhausted. The guard led them out of the cell and into an antechamber, where twenty fully armored soldiers were waiting for them. They all had shields and spears out and at the ready, their eyes fixed on the two prisoners.

The telv man from the night prior stood there at the head of the assembly. “There will be no repeats of last night. Try anything and you will both be killed.”

Sloane’s eyes narrowed, but she did not respond.

The man took her silence for acceptance and gestured toward the door.

As Sloane and Nemura started walking, all of the soldiers moved into formation around them.

Sloane swallowed hard as the severity of their situation started to settle into her.

I hope Stefan is having more luck.