

Expected Obstacles

No Death Without Payment.

That was the motto of the Blades Guild. An organization known to exist, but one that still skirted the shadows of society. There were not many branches of the guild, as most cities and nations did not want them operating within their borders, but those that did have a Blades Guild had one thing in common: they were feared. The guild was made up of trained individuals who were paid to carry out covert operations, often involving espionage, assassination, or sabotage.

While there were other organizations that had better trained or better-equipped personnel—the Fists of Vlaredia or to a greater extent, the Paladins of Alos, the Blades represented professionals in their craft. A group of individuals able to blend in with their surroundings and strike with deadly precision, alone or with a team.

Even in places where they did not have a presence, you could often find the aftermath of one of their assignments. The Guild strategically placed its branches so that all of Ikios could be serviced.

But the guild had a strict code of conduct. They would not take on a job unless they were paid the full amount upfront, and they would never accept a job that went against their moral code. They were not common murderers for hire, but rather, highly skilled professionals who carried out their work with honor and integrity.

Stefan had been a soldier once, fighting for Marketbol of all places, against rival Cities when an offer to join the Guilds had come. Eventually, that would lead him to travel to Thirdghyll and work with the guild there.

His first assignment as a Blade had been a team operation. The guild had been contracted to infiltrate a rival House, rescue a noble's daughter, and then make a statement.

Stefan realized then how duplicitous the nobility could be.

The daughter had fallen in love with the son, and the two had kept it secret. Or tried to. The father had found out and then used the daughter's rendezvous with the son as an excuse to end a rival.

And it had worked. What had been a story of forbidden love, turned into another sort of tale. He'd always wondered why the daughter had fought him so hard when he was trying to save her. Why anyone would want to remain in that situation.

The noble had indeed ensured the House had been broken and without its Head and Heir after hiring the Blades, but Stefan learned that not even a week later, the daughter had killed herself.

She had loved the boy and they were going to run away together. Make a life away from the inter-House war their families constantly fought.

When the guild learned the truth, the Guildmaster of the local branch had not been happy.

And thus the noble had been added to the list of precautionary tales of why you do not lie to the guild.

It wasn't often that Stefan Stranca got to truly employ his abilities, especially now as part of House Reinhart. He had sworn to Lady Sloane and had been doing his best to protect her as she changed the world and found her daughter.

But that wasn't his purpose.

His purpose was to serve as a Blade, to use his training and skills to carry out covert operations and complete assignments that required the utmost precision and discretion.

It's why he so often bristled at just being a guard. He could fight, and he could infiltrate locations, but this...

I really need Sloane to find her daughter so that I can convince her to utilize my skillset better.

Stefan silently observed the prison where Sloane and Nemura were being held, his mind ran down options for retrieving them as he surveyed the surrounding area from the rooftop of a nearby building.

He had access to House Reinhart's funds and could hire a team to help, but the issue would be what to do after. They needed to get on the ship in three days, and he doubted the merchant vessel would appreciate or allow the group to use the ship to elude the City Guard.

No, that would have to be a last resort.

Movement at the front caught his attention. Stefan saw two guards walking out of the prison doors, with Sloane and Nemura between them. Neither seemed harmed, which was good, and they walked with their heads held high.

A wagon sat there, and he gritted his teeth as the two were roughly pushed forward. Sloane caught herself before falling over and scowled as she climbed up into the wagon, and Stefan saw with some satisfaction as the same shove barely swayed the tely woman. Nemura turned and scowled at the guard who had tried to push her and the man stepped back in fear. His fellow guard then shook her head and stepped up into the wagon behind Sloane.

As the wagon pulled away, Stefan quickly scrambled over to the rooftop of the nearby buildings and followed along as it made its way through the city streets. He kept a safe distance but always kept them in sight. He knew that he needed to wait for the right moment to make his move, but he couldn't help feeling a sense of urgency.

After a quarter bell of following along, Stefan watched as the wagon pulled up in front of a large government building. The guards escorting Sloane and Nemura led them inside and disappeared from view. If the two were already seeing a justicar, it meant that he would need to act fast. Clearly, the city was moving forward with sentencing, and he needed to come up with a plan.

Breaking them out would be a last resort, but he knew there was one organization that had a vested interest in Sloane's business.

He watched for a few more minutes before leaving, he would need to hurry.



Sloane walked through the halls of the city's courthouse, or whatever they called it. She'd lost interest in anything the city of Swanbrook did, and it was taking all of her willpower to even go along with the farce.

She didn't get a chance to observe her surroundings because every time she tried to look away from in front of her, the guard following behind her gave her a shove. The guard behind Nemura seemed more hesitant, probably because the man was scared of her.

That suited the big telv just fine.

Sloane was hesitant to do anything, though. Especially since she may have messed up when she had her little show, not that she regretted it. But now instead of just a few guards, they had at least twenty with them in addition to the two that stayed at their side.

Fighting them would have a lot of collateral damage. That would be a last resort.

The group of guards led the two women into what a sign by the entrance called the Justicar's Hall. Sloane stole a glance around as they entered.

The room was a grand, intimidating space that Sloane figured was designed to make the judged feel small. The hall was adorned with ornate decor, from the high, vaulted ceilings to the intricately carved pillars lining the walls. Thick curtains were drawn across the windows, removing all sources of natural light from the space.

Because of this, the room was dimly lit, with small oil lamps flickering in sconces along the walls. The sound of people whispering echoed throughout the chamber, adding to the already tense atmosphere. The room was dominated by a raised platform at the far end, where who she assumed was the Justicar sat on a large, intricately carved chair with a golden scepter in his hand. The man was an old telv man, who had dark grey hair with a serious set to his aged face.

Sloane could see a crowd of people off to the side, watching the proceedings with a mixture of interest and trepidation. Down at the front, awaiting the two of them was a priest. The man was a moon elf who stared right at her with a look that could kill on his face.

She knew she was in for a long, grueling trial, but she refused to let the weight of the room bear down on her.

Sloane and Nemura were led to the front of the room, where the Justicar sat silently observing them. As they reached the center of the open area, the room fell silent, and the procession of guards spread out around the area.

The Justicar's eyes narrowed at their manacled hands, and he turned to one of the guards. "Captain, why are they still chained?" he asked. "And why do you require so many to guard two women? And fully armored, at that?"

"The prisoners were too dangerous to be unchained, Justicar," the captain responded, his voice firm and unwavering. He pointed at Sloane. "This one is able to use magic. And has proved to be hostile. We believe this should be enough to subdue her, but not without potential losses."

The Justicar nodded slowly, his gaze still fixed on Sloane. "I have here that you were seen murdering a paladin and five men who attempted to stop you and your accomplice. What is your name, terran?"

Sloane straightened her back. "Baroness Sloane Reinhart, House Reinhart of Blightwych."

The man's eyes narrowed further. "Blightwych granted you peerage?"

"They acknowledged my peerage and a member of the royal family affirmed the status by granting citizenship and formation of my House," Sloane replied, her voice steady despite the chains weighing down her wrists.

The Justicar's gaze shifted back to the captain. "Remove her chains, Captain," he ordered. Then as a guard started removing Sloane's manacles, he continued, "The report states that the accomplice was a male raithe. This woman clearly does not fit that description," he said, indicating Nemura.

The high elf captain nodded. "She was present with the murderer. We believe she is a third accomplice to these crimes."

Sloane rubbed her wrists as the telv Justicar peered down at Nemura. "What do you have to say to this?"

"All I have to say on the matter is this: I am My Lady's senior guardswoman. Formerly of Westaren, but released from service to provide protection to the Baroness in return for her part in saving a large portion of the population of Thirdghyll during its fall. Baroness Reinhart is the Savior of Marketbol and is credited as being the sole reason it did not fall to the Vlaredians. That she has been treated like a common

criminal is an insult to her status and her accomplishments,” Nemura spoke up, her voice firm and resolute.

Gasps rippled through the room at Nemura's declaration.

The Justicar raised an eyebrow at Nemura's bold statement, but he did not interrupt her. When she finished speaking, he turned his gaze back to Sloane.

“Baroness Reinhart, I need to ask you directly,” he began, his voice firm and commanding. “Did you commit these crimes?”

Sloane met his gaze, her expression unflinching. “I did not murder Vicori Fynn, the paladin. We were meeting him at his request and found him dead after we arrived. We were immediately ambushed by the five men in question and forced to defend ourselves.”

The Justicar sat in contemplation as he listened to Sloane's explanation. “Why did you not report the attack?” he asked.

“We were in shock and disoriented from the attack,” Sloane replied. “Due to the nature of the attack, I wanted to ensure the safety of the other members of my House. We had barely sat down to discuss the matter when we were arrested at the inn.”

The Justicar nodded slowly, considering her words. “Captain, how did the Guard respond so quickly to this incident?”

The captain cleared his throat before responding. “We received an anonymous tip about suspicious activity at the inn, that combined with the eye witness from the scene allowed us to apprehend the terran.”

The Justicar listened carefully to the captain's response. “An anonymous tip, you say? And yet you were able to locate the baroness immediately?”

The captain shifted uncomfortably. “Yes, Justicar. It was a stroke of luck, I suppose.”

The Justicar did not seem convinced, but he did not press the matter any further. Instead, he turned his attention back to Sloane. “Baroness, you understand the gravity of the situation you find yourself in. The high priest here is understandably upset and the murder of a paladin is a serious crime—”

The high priest of the city stepped forward, his face twisted in anger. “*Upset?* One of our paladins is dead, and the other two are missing. Her accomplice is still on the loose,” he spat out. The moon elf turned his gaze on Sloane. “Your status and accomplishments do not exempt you from justice, Baroness. You murdered six people, including one of the Church's protectors. The gods demand justice, and justice demands your execution. Relena will judge your guilt.”

Sloane held her head high, refusing to let the priest intimidate her. “As I stated, I am innocent in the death of Vicori Fynn, Justicar,” she said firmly. “I do not know how the guard reacted so quickly to us, but it seems suspect. Further, it appears that the high

priest has already made his judgment before hearing my side of the story or any evidence of the matter.”

“What evidence is needed, terran? You were *seen* killing all of those people,” the high priest sneered.

“And where are my accusers?” she snapped back. “I see no one except those present. If I have been accused of killing the vicori, then you should present your evidence. Otherwise, this is a farce. It is not a crime to defend yourself.”

The high priest glared at Sloane, his anger palpable. “The evidence against you is overwhelming, terran,” he said through gritted teeth. “The eyewitness saw you and your accomplice attacking the paladin. And as for your accomplice, the Church will not stand for the Guard not performing its duties in bringing them to justice and finding our missing paladins.”

The Justicar intervened before the situation could escalate further. “High priest, let us not forget that we are here to investigate this matter and determine the truth. It is not our place to make hasty judgments and condemnations.”

The high priest scowled but did not argue with the Justicar’s words. “Very well, Justicar. But I demand that any other members of the baroness’s House be remanded into the Church’s custody until this matter is resolved.”

Sloane’s eyes narrowed at the high priest’s demand.

He knows about Mariel.

She took a moment to consider a response. She had no ties to the city. If they had to leave and find another way, they would. “I will not allow my House members to be used as pawns in this political game. They have nothing to do with this matter and are innocent. I will not stand for their imprisonment, and I will act to prevent any hostile acts against my House, *including* from the Temple of Swanbrook.”

The Justicar held up a hand, signaling for silence. “Baroness, I understand your concerns, but for the sake of this investigation, I must agree with the high priest. Until we can determine the truth of this matter, it is necessary to ensure the safety of all parties involved. I assure you that they will be treated fairly and with respect.”

Sloane gritted her teeth and shook her head. “I am telling you right now. I will not allow it,” she said, instinctively pulling mana into herself. “Do *not* force my hand on this issue.”

The guards shifted and several spears were lowered in her direction.

The Justicar raised a hand again, his expression stern. “Baroness, I implore you to calm yourself. We do not wish for any violence to occur here today. I only seek the truth.”

Sloane took a deep breath and forced herself to relax, allowing her mana to dissipate. She nodded to the Justicar. “I understand, Justicar. But I want it known that I will not be intimidated by anyone, including the Temple of Swanbrook.”

The high priest sneered at Sloane. “You are not in a position to make demands, terran. The Church will not be deterred by your bravado.” He faced the Justicar. “I have sent a request for more paladins. If the city will not execute her, the paladins will.”

The man turned back toward Sloane. “The Church will have its justice one way or another.”

Sloane locked eyes with the high priest, her own gaze steady and unflinching. “We shall see about that,” she said softly, but with a hint of steel in her voice.

The Justicar cleared his throat. “Now, if we may return to the matter at hand. Baroness, do you have anything else to offer in your defense?”

Sloane nodded. “Yes, Justicar. There is one thing that I think may be of interest to you.” She looked at the high priest. “The entire reason Vicori Fynn offered to meet us there, was because he did not trust those at the temple. He stated the praetor was already missing at that point and that the evocati was searching for them. No one from my House has met any other paladin from this city. Now, the men who attacked us stated that the vicori was involving himself in things that he shouldn’t. It appears that those attackers had already been operating in the city before we even arrived. That they knew where Vicori Fynn would be, to me, lends credence that they were either warned or sent by someone in the Temple itself.”

The high priest’s face turned red with anger. “How dare you accuse us of such a thing! The Church would never condone such actions!”

The Justicar held up a hand, and everyone silenced. “It seems this situation is larger than it first appeared. Captain,” he said, looking at the high elf guard. “Investigate the source of your information. If the Baroness refuses to give up the member of her House that aided her, you will need to locate them as well. Further, search for the two missing paladins, their safety is paramount.”

His focus returned to Sloane and Nemura. “In the meantime, you two will remain in custody and you will be treated as dangerous, making threats in my hall is unacceptable. Further, all other members of your House will be taken into custody by the Guard, not the temple—”

The high priest’s eyes bulged. “Justicar, I implore you—”

“*Enough!* This is my decision, and my decisions are law. We will reconvene in four days, and I will decide whether Baroness Sloane is guilty of murder. I request that the Church respects my decision.”

“If you do not order her execution, *Justicar*, then the Church will. I promise you an inquisition will come down on this city for these crimes if you support the murder of paladins,” the high priest stated, before spinning on his heel and stomping away.

“The Church will do as it must,” the Justicar ground out.

Sloane’s heart sank at the Justicar’s words.

The Justicar looked at Nemura with a bit of sympathy in his expression as the doors slammed with the high priest’s departure. “Senior Guardsman Nemura, I will give you this opportunity to renounce your service to House Reinhart and go freely. You need not give your life up for the crimes of another.”

Nemura narrowed her eyes. “You just ordered your captain to investigate further, yet it seems you too have made up your mind. I will never betray the baroness.”

The old telv ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “Very well. It is my hope that the investigation proves your innocence. Otherwise, it seems your fates are determined.”

Sloane had hoped for a fair investigation, but it seemed that the high priest’s influence over the city and Justicar was too strong. She looked at Nemura, who wore a determined expression on her face. She knew the woman would be ready whenever Sloane was.

The Justicar looked at Sloane for a moment, then nodded. “Very well. You will have your trial in four days’ time. Until then, you will remain in custody.”

Sloane sighed as the guards stepped forward to put the manacles back on their wrists.

Stefan has four days, or I burn this city down around me.

There would always be other ships.

If I have to steal one, I will.



Stefan walked into the grand halls of the Banking Guild, his eyes scanning the vast space in awe. The guild’s location within Swanbrook was a massive structure that stood proudly in the heart of the city, with towering pillars and high ceilings that made it seem like a palace more than a banking institution. The sound of coins being counted and papers being shuffled echoed through the halls, creating a symphony of business and commerce that filled the air.

Approaching the front desk, Stefan cleared his throat to get the attention of the receptionist. The young woman, an orkun woman, looked up from her ledger and met his gaze. “May I help you?” she asked politely.

“I need to speak with the Guildmaster,” Stefan said firmly, “It’s a matter of vital importance.”

The receptionist raised an eyebrow, looking unimpressed. “And what business do you have with the Guildmaster?”

Stefan hesitated for a moment, considering how much information to reveal. “I cannot say, but I assure you it concerns matters that the guildmaster will deem important,” he replied with a sense of urgency.

The receptionist gave him a scrutinizing look, but then nodded. “Very well, I will send a runner to inform the Guildmaster of your request. Please wait here.” She gestured towards a nearby bench and then turned to call for a young boy who was loitering nearby.

Several minutes later, the runner returned and made a beeline toward Stefan. “The Guildmaster will see you now,” he said before leading the way down a side corridor.

As Stefan followed the runner through the maze of hallways and doors, he couldn't help but feel anxious. He knew that the Banking Guild was supportive of Sloane, but he had no idea how the Guildmaster would react to his request. When they finally arrived at a set of ornate double doors, the runner gestured for Stefan to wait outside before slipping into the room to announce his arrival. A few moments later, the runner returned and opened the door, beckoning Stefan inside.

Stefan stepped into the Guildmaster's office, taking in the luxurious decor and fine furnishings that spoke of wealth and prestige. The Guildmaster himself was a shrewd-looking older sun elf, with sharp features and a piercing gaze that seemed to size Stefan up in an instant. He sat behind a large mahogany desk, surrounded by stacks of parchment and ledgers.

“Greetings, young man,” the Guildmaster said in a deep, gravelly voice. “I understand you have come to see me on a matter of vital importance. What can I do for you?”

Stefan took a deep breath and stepped forward, feeling the weight of what was required of him pressing down on him.

“I represent House Reinhart. There has been a situation and—”

“*Baroness Sloane Reinhart?*” the Guildmaster asked.

Stefan narrowed his eyes. “Yes... That is my liege.”

The old sun elf rifled through the organized chaos on his desk until he found a scroll. “This letter arrived from the Grandmaster not three weeks ago,” he said. “Do you know what it is about?”

Stefan shook his head. “I do not.”

“Grandmaster Markus has ordered me to provide any and all aid to Lady Sloane with whatever resources I have available,” he explained. “The letter goes into more detail, but apparently your ruby-tier lady is important.”

Stefan sighed in relief. It was as if a boulder had been lifted from his shoulders as the Guildmaster spoke.

The man continued, “Now, what seems to be the issue?”

Stefan quickly explained the situation with Sloane, including her wrongful imprisonment and the corrupt temple. He emphasized the urgency of the matter and the need for the Banking Guild's assistance in freeing her. He spoke of the support the Blades Guild would provide and about how Evocati Yemina was currently recovering after her attack.

The Guildmaster listened carefully, his shrewd eyes never leaving Stefan's face. When Stefan finished, the man stroked his chin thoughtfully before speaking.

“Lady Sloane is indeed important to us,” the Guildmaster said. “She is a valuable asset to the Guild, and we cannot let her suffer unjustly. I will see what can be done, but understand that we must act with caution. If we push too hard, they may execute her before we can secure her freedom. I will contact some trusted allies and see what resources we can muster. The Blades Guild and your paladin will be vital to the effort.”

Stefan winced. “Guildmaster... I do not fear that they may execute her, I fear that she will lose patience and will burn the city to the ground with her magic if they force it.”

The sun elf's eyes widened. “That is indeed a valid concern,” the Guildmaster replied slowly. “I will make sure to inform our allies of this possibility and advise them to act swiftly. We will not let Lady Sloane come to harm.”

He paused for a moment before continuing, “I will also inform the city's council that the Grandmaster has... advised that he is not above sending whatever assets required to ensure her safety—war or not. It appears that he does not hold the politicians of this city in high regard, and expected her to run into some obstacles. We need to move quickly, so I suggest preparing the paladin and possibly enlisting the aid of more Blades to ensure her safety. I will send word to Guildmaster Cross that we will open a line of funding for expenses. We will be in touch soon.”

Stefan nodded gratefully before taking his leave.

Just a bit longer, Sloane.

First, he just had to make sure the paladin made it.