

A Step... Wait, what?

Sloane and Stefan followed the priestess into the temple. Almost immediately guards wearing white gambesons stepped in their path.

“Priestess, you know we cannot have so many armed guests enter at this time,” A voice said from Sloane’s left. She looked over and she heard Stefan lightly gasp as a sun elf woman appeared. The woman wore red plate armor that shined in the fire cast by the oil lamps. She wore a tabard that was white with sparkling gold stitching used both in the border and in the large geometrically shaped sun just below the woman’s chest. She had a large kite shield strapped to her back and a flanged mace on her right hip and a dagger on the left. *Huh, I bet she’s left-handed.*

The high elf woman smiled. “Oh, Praetor. My apologies, you are absolutely correct.”

The woman... *Praetor? That is a strange name.* The woman looked over Sloane and her guards. “I am Praetor Shalas. Your House Guards will remain at the entrance with the Temple Guard. Your personal guard may remain with you. However, your weapons are to remain sheathed, *Blade.*” *Ohh, it's a rank.*

Stefan quickly saluted and bowed his head. “Of course, Praetor.”

Sloane’s mouth fell open as she looked at the raihte in shock. Just a moment ago he had been talking about how he was not religious and felt the church was stuffy. *The hell?*

The woman’s lips turned upward and she looked at the priestess. “I will escort them from here, priestess.”

The high elf looked slightly taken aback, but she recovered quickly and bowed her head. “As you say, Praetor. I will return outside.” She looked at Sloane. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Lady Reinhart. Please pass along my regards to Ser Maud.”

Sloane smiled. “I will do that.”

The woman inclined her head again before hurrying away. It was strange.

“You wear your curiosity and confusion quite openly. Is that a trait that other terrans hold?”

Sloane turned her head toward the sun elf, examining her. What she saw was a woman who appeared about her own age, but spoke with a confidence and surety that Sloane could not match. *Not yet.*

“I imagine it is as common as with any other race,” She said diplomatically.

“Hmm.” Was all the response she got. The woman gestured and started walking. Sloane quickly moved to stay beside the woman while Stefan followed behind.

They moved along the outer aisles of the temple which reminded her of many cathedrals within France and the like. In fact, the interior layout was similar to the Amiens Cathedral. The only difference was the pure white marble used throughout and the abundance of green plant life in the form of vines circling the pillars that flanked both sides of the nave.

The ceiling was lined with a series of roof lanterns that allowed sunlight to shine down, giving a lovely natural light to the area.

“Your temple is lovely,” Sloane said.

The woman nodded. “Mmm.”

They exited the area she assumed was available for lay worshippers and moved into the rear where she saw groups of the clergy. Everyone was speaking softly, and Sloane lowered her voice as she asked another question, “Are we meeting the High Priest?”

Praetor Shalas turned her head slightly but again did not acknowledge her.

They walked through a set of doors where another sun elf wearing similar armor to the woman stood. The only difference was that his armor was slightly less ornate, which she took as denoting his rank or status.

Another gesture indicated which room they should enter.

Sloane sighed. “You do not communicate well. Is that a trait that other members of the church hold?”

She heard slight choking from behind her and a breathy chuckle from the woman. “I imagine it is as common as with any other race.”

Sloane couldn't help it. She huffed in amusement while entering the room. *Cheeky bitch.*

Inside was a decently sized room that seemed as if it had functioned as another small chapel before everything was removed. The only furniture remaining in the room was a pedestal that held a large crystal ball.

“This isn't ominous or anything...” She murmured.

“I imagine it would seem that way. I am satisfied.”

Sloane groaned. “Can we get the other priestess back? She was much more lively.”

“*Sloane!*” Stefan whisper-shouted at her. She ignored him.

“Tell me, Lady Reinhart. Why have you come today?” The woman asked. No one else was in the room, just them and the red-armored sun elf. She appeared serious, and to Sloane, it seemed almost like a test. *Fine. I will respond to directness with directness.*

“I saw a crowd and got curious. The apparent lack of surprise or anything overt concerning my friend and her use of magic also has me curious. I expected a much different response from the religious organization in this world to the appearance of mana and magic. I suspect that is because you have discovered your own members can utilize it. If true, I would like to seek what knowledge you have and am willing to trade for said knowledge with my own.”

Praetor Shalas narrowed her eyes as if she was appraising Sloane all over again. After seemingly coming to a conclusion, she nodded. “Fair enough. You are not like the other terrans I have met.”

Sloane couldn't hide her surprise. “You have met other terrans?”

The woman's eyes widened slightly. “That is what I have said. It seems you wear your emotions like one does clothes. You will need to school that if you wish to survive the level of society you have placed yourself within.”

“I will take that under advisement.”

“But yes. I have met other terrans. Many, in fact.”

Sloane took a deep breath. *Should I?* She searched the woman’s face, wondering if the question would be worth it, or if it would give too much away. Sloane had made numerous errors in how she had interacted with people in the past, and she knew that she needed to be wary, but she needed information. She decided to go with it.

“Have you met or seen any children?” She asked, almost hesitantly.

The woman cocked her head to the side, and her eyes darted back and forth as if reading Sloane like a book. *She very well could be with magic.*

“I have. I suspect that none of the children I have met is the one you are searching for.”

“How do you know?”

“None bore even a passing resemblance to you. Your tone was not one of a passing curiosity. You are searching for someone who holds a deep connection to you. A child? You are too old to be searching for a sibling, I believe. A son?”

Sloane winced ever so slightly.

“No. A daughter. I am sorry. There were two young girls, but they were both siblings and were with an older relative. Their grandfather, I believe.”

She couldn’t help herself, Sloane let out a sob as her shoulders sagged. The woman quickly moved forward and supported her by holding her arms. The praetor leaned close and whispered, “Alos will protect her until you can be reunited. Of this, I am certain. You keep hold of your strength and wear it well. I know not of your terran gods, but Alos sees not race in those of his followers. He shines down upon us all, but I am not here to convert you. In time, I suspect you will see his and his pantheon’s value.”

Sloane nodded. “Thank you. I apologize. I am here for other reasons.”

The woman tilted her head slightly but then nodded. “Yes. For magic.”

“I have learned a lot since arriving in your world. I... I apologize, I am not sure where to begin. Do you have someone that I could sit down with and we could discuss findings?”

The woman's lips curled upward. "I suspect I know a way we could begin. Please, over here." She gestured toward the pedestal in the room.

"Um, okay. Sure." Sloane walked with the woman and stepped toward the pedestal.

Praetor Shalas turned her head to the side and rested her hand on the hilt of her mace. "She is in position and we are ready," The sun elf called out.

Sloane jerked her head to the side, hands coming up to form two **Mana Bolts**. She started slowly backing away as a high elf entered in elaborate robes. The sun elf looked at Sloane and curled her hand around her mace's haft. "I did not realize you were so easily startled. Please cancel your spells."

With a scowl directed at the woman, Sloane lowered her hands, letting the bolts dissipate back into mana. "I cannot believe you are not aware of what is happening within the city right now, Praetor Shalas. I have been ambushed *twice* now by a magic-wielding Vlatedian," she sneered.

"I am aware. I simply felt you had more control than you now appear to. That was my mistake. I will endeavor to ensure the wind announces its presence before it scares you into burning down the city."

Sloane's scowl deepened as her mind whirled. The woman had shown true kindness when Sloane had spoken of Gwyn but had immediately returned to antagonizing her after. "You are deliberately provoking me. Why? We do not know each other. What have I done to you?"

The woman let out an exaggerated sigh, but the priest spoke, narrowing his eyes at the falcon on her shoulder. "Terrans. Your people have come into our world like a storm. It seems that every other one of your people believes they can change our society 'for the better'."

"I have not done anything that has not been welcomed by those of *this* world."

The praetor opened her mouth but was again cut off by the priest. "Of course. What reasonable person would not be swayed by such honeyed promises? Yours are benign and do seemingly seek to provide benefits. It is not solely altruistic of you, I am aware of your true desires, and before you say anything, I do not blame you. Others of your kind have not always done as you.

“This army that lay at our door. Do you know how they were able to arrive? A terran was working with the dwarves of Dheg Malduhr. He promised them a new sort of weapon, a new *technology*. One fueled by what you have named mana. By magic. The city is no more. Destroyed in a large flash that tore down a mountain.”

Sloane gasped as her eyes widened and she instinctively covered her mouth with her hands. *He didn't... Did he make... No...*

“I can see by your expression that you may be aware of what possibly occurred. That is the problem. Other terrans have promised more and have either died or gotten innocents killed for it. The church received this information from a priest that survived. As such, the church within the Sovereign Cities has sent a request and we now await a Decree to be enacted by Her Holiness, the Archpriestess. One that will ban any-and-all terran designed weapons from being used.”

Sloane let out a breath she hadn't known she was holding. “Good.”

“W-What?” Praetor Shalas was shocked. *Serves her right.*

“I know what weapons of my people can do. I still do not know where the terminology ‘terran’ came from, but every thought I have on the subject scares me. If there are humans—*terrans* that are more advanced than my people here? Then I can only imagine what destruction they could cause. You spoke of a city that had been destroyed? My people had tens of thousands of such weapons. Enough to destroy civilization across the entire world. I do not wish for your people to live under such threats. One where one man could end life as everyone knew it.”

A small gasp could be heard from behind her, Stefan likely taking in the knowledge she was openly presenting.

She looked the Praetor in her widened eyes. “So, again, good. I have made some weapons that I have used to protect myself and those with me, but even those are not as effective as magic itself. I see so many other options, like Tiberius, here,” She said, shaking her shoulder where her bird sat.

“Wryaat!”

“I wish to establish *positive* relationships. You both know why. I want to find my daughter, and creating enemies will only hinder that. Granted, that ship has sailed with the Vlaredians. So if you will excuse me, I will not tell you my daughter’s name for fear she may have arrived within their Empire.”

The praetor dipped her head. “It would be unconscionable for me to use a child against you. It goes against every belief I hold dear. Whatever the High Priest and my own beliefs on your people, please trust that.”

Sloane inclined her head. “Thank you.”

The high priest took a deep breath. “You truly seek to *help* instead of harm?”

“I believe my track record in that regard may not be as obvious as I’d like, but yes. I have people here and only one of which is a terran, mind you. I want them protected. No matter where they hail from. As I said, I wish to establish positive relations with various contacts to fund what may be a weeks or years-long search for my daughter. I will travel anywhere I have to, but I cannot do so if I am broke.”

The praetor looked at the high priest and nodded. “She is telling the truth.”

Sloane’s eyes widened and she quickly used her **Mana Sight**. “Did you just cast a truth spell? A lie detection spell?”

The sun elf sighed. “She’s a scholar through and through. Yes, I used magic that allowed me to ascertain the veracity of your words. It is why I have been provoking you.”

Dropping her sight spell, Sloane scowled at the woman. “What is this,” She asked, indicating the large yellow orb sitting on the pedestal.

The high priest stepped forward. “You have been making your strides in discovering this new existence we live in, and so have others. This room is the beginning of something new. Something that will one day fill an integral part of our society.”

Sloane tilted her head, and the praetor laughed. “I do not believe I even needed to utilize magic to read you.”

“Watch it. Just because you have broken my guard somehow, doesn’t mean I am scared of you.”

The woman’s eyes grew predatory. “I am a Paladin of Alos. I have risen to the rank of Praetor by spilling the blood of those who sought to harm innocents. The Empire’s Fist are naught but mewlings that aspire to live in our shadow. Do not confuse my current demeanor with weakness. If you seek to harm me or any innocents, I will cut you down before you can cast a single spell. No matter how strong you believe it to be.”

Sloane smirked. “It seems you can be provoked just as easily.” ...*Bitch.*

Shalas scowled, but the high priest just laughed. “You two can settle this over an ale after we have finished.”

The paladin sputtered, and Sloane scoffed. “Members of the church can drink here?”

“Why could we not?” The high priest asked.

Sloane shrugged. “Huh. Fair enough. Please, continue.”

The man gave her another searching look but then continued, “As I was saying. This room is the beginning of something new. A Ceremony of Paths which will be conducted by certain priests and priestesses. This orb, combined with our magic, allows us to learn about what changes *mana* has bestowed upon you by the will of the gods. We can gain details of your person, and we will use this to help the people of Eona find their lot in life. To help give direction to those who may otherwise be lost or unfulfilled. We—” *Holy shit.*

“Holy shit. You can read my status.”

A satisfying look of confusion came over both members of the church as her outburst interrupted him.

“You... *know* what I wish to do?”

“If I am translating all of your religious jargon correctly? Yes. You are going to use magic to identify or learn information about me, as it pertains to *mana* and the changes that have happened since the Flash.”

The two glanced at each other and the man nodded. “Yes. That is essentially it.” He looked around, and it seemed like she threw off his presentation.

“Should we start?”

“Yes. Yes... Please, come place your hands on either side of the orb. There are markings. I will place mine on the opposite side.”

She stepped up and looked down at the orb, which is when she finally noticed the yellow swirling within it. Sloane gasped and looked up. “This is a core! Where the hell did you find one so large?” The core was as large as her *head!*

Shalas adopted a smug look. “My paladins and I hunted down a beast in the mountains south of us that had been preying on several villages. The beast was massive but slow. This is the orb that was inside it.”

Sloane shook her head. “These are called cores. We all have them. Animals have them, including the monsters that have been mutated by excessive mana. It is your mana core that connects you to mana and allows you to channel it.”

The high priest nodded. “Your core... Yes. I can see it. Thank you for this freely given information, Lady Reinhart.”

Sloane raised a brow, muttering, “I’ve passed on a lot of freely given information since being here...”

Shalas scowled, indicating how unamused the woman was. *I do not understand this woman.*

She gestured from her eyes to the core. “May I?”

The high priest nodded and Sloane used her **Mana Sight** as she placed her hands on the indicated spots, and the high priest did the same.

Praetor Shalas quickly moved to a shelf that was along the wall and gathered a wooden plank, a scroll, and a quill. She rushed back over and set herself up. “Ready, high priest.”

The man closed his eyes and Sloane felt a small burst of mana flow from the orb into her and then back into the orb. She looked down and the orb went from yellow to white before a

swirl of colors started to form. The high priest opened his eyes and looked down, unable to contain his surprise as he took in what he saw.

“Praetor, record this. **Affinity: Blue, Red, and Yellow.**”

She heard a strangled noise coming from the paladin.

His voice seemed to deepen, and his eyes glowed yellow and became unfocused. The paladin wrote down as the man dictated what he learned of her.

Sloane Reinhart

“The Enchantress”

Terran

Path: Artificer

Purpose: Innovator

Core Quality: Rare

Alignment: Mental

Steps: 41

Key Attribute: Control

The praetor gasped but she still dutifully wrote what had been said. When finished, the glow in the priest’s eyes dimmed and his focus returned.

Steps? Forty-one? Wait... Holy shit. I’m level forty-one?

“Did you get all of that, Praetor?” *He doesn’t remember?*

The sun elf spoke softly. “Yes, high priest. Her steps... they’re the highest of anyone we have seen yet, and there is a new line. *Core Quality.*”

He glanced at her. “Core quality, hmm. Perhaps that is due to the knowledge the baroness has imparted. What were her steps?” *Interesting... the more aware he is of the system, the more information he can gather? I wonder what the extent of that is...*

“Forty-one, high priest.”

The man turned and looked at Sloane. “That is indeed significantly higher than anyone else we have performed this on. What step were you on, Praetor?”

“Twenty-eight, high priest,” The woman said, almost whispering. *Take that, bitch!*

“Hmm.”

“Why do you call them steps?” Sloane asked.

The man looked at her as if she were a child that he was ready to teach how to walk. “Because they represent the key steps you take on your path of life as you attempt to fulfill your true purpose as decreed by the gods.”

She winced. “But they’re levels,” she mumbled

The praetor scowled. “The gods have given us this great gift. They seek to elevate all people of Eona. To bestow great power upon them. The steps show how far you have reached toward the heavens.”

“So, they are steps up the staircase to power?”

The woman nodded. “Precisely. I see that you are understanding.”

“So these upward steps... If only there was a term that would better explain that feeling you gain. Like reaching a new...”

Shalas gave her an unamused look.

Sloane continued. “I mean, why go up a flight of stairs in the first place? It’s as if we are attempting to reach a higher...” She snapped her fingers a few times. “I know there is a word for it.” She glanced at Stefan. “Help me out here, Stefan. A new floor? No, that’s silly...”

The blade's eyes darted between her and the sun elf.

“*Leave.*”

Sloane turned back to the paladin. “I’m sorry, what was that, twenty-eight?”

The woman took a step forward. “You—”

“It doesn’t feel good, does it? In the future, you do not need to be an asshole just to get someone to express themselves truthfully.”

Sloane paused before saying anything else as she got an idea.

The high priest sighed. “Lady Reinhart, please. Praetor Shalas, why don’t you—”

“Can we perform this on my guard?” Sloane asked.

Stefan started choking, and Shalas looked like she was about to have an aneurysm.

With a cough, the high priest glanced between her and the paladin. “Very well. If you would, Mr...”

“S-Stefan, high priest,” her raithe guard said as he stepped forward.

Sloane slapped Stefan on the back. “Come on, buddy. Don’t be shy. This is an opportunity we may not get to experience again for a while.”

He nodded and stepped up to the pedestal with the high priest. Both men placed their hands on the core and Sloane settled into place beside Shalas, and just to be petty, moved closer to be inside her personal space. The sound of grinding teeth was like sweet music.

The core again changed colors and settled into a mist of black, denoting the raithe’s affinity.

Then the high priest spoke what she assumed to be the basic version of Stefan’s status sheet. The paladin dutifully wrote it down. *That paper will be coming with me when we leave. No matter how benign this information is.*

Stefan Stranca

“The Blade”

Raithe

Path: Infiltrator

Purpose: Rogue

Core Quality: Common

Alignment: Physical

Steps: 22

Key Attribute: Capability

Control and Capability. Two out of three... But only level 22? Come on man. No wonder Nemura is kicking your ass. Those are rookie numbers.

The priest came to and Stefan was looking between the paladin and Sloane with wide eyes.

“Was that informative, Stefan?” She asked the infiltrator.

The man nodded quickly. “Yes, My Lady.”

She sighed. *Shit. I'm going to have to talk with him about how this isn't the work of the gods, aren't I?*

Shit. I can't do that... ugh. Don't get involved in religion, Sloane.

Sloane inclined her head toward the high elf. “I appreciate the knowledge you have given us, high priest. This has been *very* informative. If you do not mind, I would like to hold onto that paper Praetor Shalas wrote. If you would indulge me, I would like to tell you about something my world calls privacy protection. Despite Praetor Shalas and my interaction thus far, I believe you two to be honorable. If you are going to be performing this task, I suggest the church treat this ceremony and the information you gather as worth more than gold, and more dangerous than any blackmail of a Queen, for example. You will have access to *very* private information that will be usable against a wide array of people. The church must keep this knowledge neutral and separate from every entity. You must be trusted completely with information of what people will eventually discover is more personal than any secret they could ever hold.”

The paladin grew serious. “What do you mean, Lady Reinhart?”

Sloane nodded, appreciating the woman putting aside any dislike for her to perform her duty. “High priest, you do not have to give me an answer, but I suspect that you are around the same level—sorry, step—as either Stefan or Praetor Shalas.”

The man nodded slowly. “I am.”

“Good. I suspect that as you use this spell more often, and increase your level...” Shalas coughed. “...You will gain the ability to learn *more* information from a person's status. This information could very well tell you everything you need to know to harm said person. What abilities or spells they may have, for example. Knowing this knowledge is dangerous, and could

put a target on you or your priests that know it. What if one of your priests gained knowledge of a prince or princess, and then when they ascended the throne of their nation, they wished to purge all that knew of their status?"

Shalas' eyes widened as she realized the ramifications of what Sloane was intimating.

"That... is extremely valuable information to know, Lady Reinhart," The woman said.

"I agree. I will work with the Archpriestess to set up a new order within the Church to ensure this information is closely guarded and remains private. The church must be a neutral beacon in the dark. One that any can come to for aid. We cannot enact the Celestials' will if we are corrupt. I thank you for this knowledge, Lady Reinhart."

He chuckled ruefully. "Amusing how something can seem so obvious in hindsight."

"We have a saying in my world, or well, a similar enough saying... but hindsight is always clear. Basically, things are obvious that were not obvious from the outset. I believe it is sometimes beneficial to evaluate something new by evaluating what all could go *wrong*, than just focusing on the one thing that would go right."

The high priest bowed his head. "Wise words, My Lady." *Eh, I kind of pulled that from my arse.*

Paladin Shalas cleared her throat. "High priest, I apologize, but I believe it is nearly time for your next meeting. Perhaps the lady could schedule a future meeting to further discuss magic?" *Oh? Now you want to play nice?*

"Ah, yes. Lady Reinhart. Thank you for coming, I hope you will return. I do believe we can discuss magic in a more open conversation that would benefit both of our organizations, and I hope you will come to see that the Church strives to do good in our world. Until then, I wish you many safe days."

He grabbed the paper from the paladin, rolled it up, and handed it to Sloane. She accepted it gratefully. "Thank you, high priest. I look forward to meeting with you again."

Stefan started to turn, but Sloane couldn't help but get one last shot in as the high priest left the room.

“So, Praetor Shalas?” She said with as sweet a voice as she could manage.

The woman gave her a blank stare. “Yes, Lady Reinhart?”

“Still up for that ale?”

The woman’s eyes narrowed slightly.

She huffed. “Not on your life.”

Sloane smiled. *Knew you were still a cheeky bitch.*