

Schism Between Light and Dark

The Blade instantly drew two daggers while Sloane filled herself with mana, keeping a connection, ready to cast spells in an instant. The two spun around and saw a group of masked figures approaching.

Stefan took two steps away from Sloane and pointed one of the long daggers at the group. "Who are you?" he demanded, his voice steady and low.

The five figures stopped a few feet away from them, and one of them stepped forward, his voice muffled by the mask. "Give us the Avatar, and you may leave freely."

"Avatar? What are you speaking of?" Stefan asked.

Sloane noticed Stefan shifting slightly to adjust to the ones on the right. She took it as a cue that she would handle the others. She pulled out her sword, the runes glowing with power.

The man gestured to his men and they started to spread out, he sighed. "The girl. Give her to us. We know she is with the other woman. You no longer have knights to protect you, do not resist."

Sloane felt her blood boil at the mention of Mariel. "You won't get her," she spat out, her hands crackling with arcane energy as she started forming two **[Mana Bolts]**.

The man looked at one of the other men and nodded, before turning back to Sloane. "You were stuck in that city for some time, terran. Others are discovering their gifts from the gods now as well," the man said as he and the second magic-user raised their hands up. "We are not afraid of your magic."

Her eyes narrowed.

Stefan glanced at the body of the paladin. "Why did you kill the paladin? No matter how strong you believe you are, it won't save you from an inquisition," he said.

The leader's hands burst into flame while the other caster's started glowing green.

"The paladins are spread too thin," he said dismissively. "They cannot stop the tide to come. This one is proof of that. A young paladin involving himself in things he shouldn't."

Sloane's eyes darted to Stefan, and the man gave her a subtle nod. She stepped further away from him. The masked men followed the movement, and then the ground started rumbling.

With a quick pull of mana, she used her **[Mana Sight]**, seeing the second caster channeling some sort of spell, she followed it to the ground, and her eyes widened.

"Stefan, look out!" she cried out, the man instantly reacting and darting toward the man closest to himself.

She flicked her wrist toward the caster and both **[Mana Bolts]** launched themselves at the second caster quickly diving to the left after doing so. She heard the spells go off and a cry of pain at the same time she felt a searing heat fly past her.

As she slammed into the ground from her poorly judged dive, she quickly rolled over, losing her sword in the process, as she dodged two more small explosions of fire.

She fired off a **[Flashbang]** that exploded in a flare that, for a moment, turned night to day, startling her attackers.

Sloane took advantage of the momentary distraction and scrambled to her feet, her eyes frantically searching for her sword. She spotted it a few feet away, lying on the ground where she had dropped it.

She made a run for it, her heart pounding in her chest as she felt the heat of another spell whizzing past her. She dove for her sword and rolled to her feet, facing her attackers once more.

Caster number two was unmoving on the ground, with two smoking wounds in his chest.

Meanwhile, Stefan had taken down one of the men that were attacking him. He had a dagger in each hand and was moving with a grace that Sloane had never seen before. He was like a blur, darting around his opponent and striking with lightning-fast precision.

Two men faced her, one with a sword and one with magic. The leader of the group, who wielded fire magic, was standing there with a scowl on his face. She ignored him, rushing toward the other man. She swung her sword, but the man easily brought his up to deflect her strike. That was fine, she shifted her stance while continuing her attack, moving to keep him between her and the caster.

The man with the sword was an amateur, and Sloane had been training with her guards and the knights for months. She feinted left and then went right, her sword slicing through the air in a deadly arc. The man parried her strike, but she was ready for it. She spun around and aimed a kick at his midsection, catching him off guard and knocking him off balance.

Sloane took advantage of the opening and lunged forward, her sword aimed at the man's chest. But he recovered quickly and managed to bring his sword up to block her attack. The two fighters were locked in a fierce struggle, their swords clanging together as they exchanged blows.

She spared a quick glance in Stefan's direction, just in time to see him take down the last of his attackers with a swift blow to the back of the head. She turned back to her own fight, focusing all of her attention on the man in front of her.

Their swords clashed once more, sending sparks flying in all directions. Sloane was starting to feel the strain of the fight, but she refused to give up. She knew that she

had to take down this man if they were going to have any chance of getting out of this alive.

She dodged another ball of fire from the caster who was entirely too comfortable standing there and tossing spells out at her and Stefan. She returned with a trio of **[Mana Bolts]**, forcing him to dive out of the way.

Her assailant took advantage of her distraction and swung at her. Without thinking, she brought up her left wrist, activating the **[Spell Buckler]** option of her watch. The shimmering blue shield sprung to life and stopped the blade before it could hit her, the honeycomb pattern rippling from the point of the strike. She shoved and took a step back, trying to create distance.

The man lunged forward and she dodged it to the side before casting a **[Flashbang]** point blank in the man's face. He cried out and swung his sword in wide arcs, trying to keep her away. She avoided the man's wild swings and launched herself forward, her sword aimed at the man's neck. He must have heard her because he tried to move away, but she was too fast. Her sword connected with his throat, slicing through his skin and muscle with ease. The man gurgled and fell to the ground, blood pouring from the wound.

She heard a shout of anger and the roar of a flame bursting into existence. Without thinking she dove into a forward roll, managing to hold onto her sword as she simultaneously dodged the spell and maneuvered to attack the caster.

Sloane popped up and quickly ducked another spell before swinging her sword toward the caster. Even as she swung, she was pulling in mana to cast.

The man brought up a short sword and caught her sword on the blade, a screech of metal on metal as hers slid down and caught on the hilt. She didn't hesitate, she lifted her free hand and cast her **[Arcane Lance]**.

A beam of Arcane energy lashed out from her hand and seared its way through the man's torso before erupting from the man's back and into the night sky. The caster screamed and fell to the ground, dead before he hit the earth.

Sloane breathed heavily as she looked around, taking stock of the situation. The other masked men were lying on the ground, dead to either spell or blade. Her watch pulsed with a notification, but she ignored it for the time being.

Stefan stood nearby, his own daggers still drawn and ready. "You all right?" he asked, concern etched on his face.

She nodded, wiping sweat from her brow, before sheathing her sword. "I'm fine. You?"

"I'm good," he replied, but Sloane could see that he was also breathing heavily, his shoulders tense with adrenaline.

Together, they surveyed the scene, making sure that there were no other attackers lurking nearby. Sloane's mind was racing, trying to figure out what the man meant by Avatar and how that related to Mariel.

"We need to get out of here," Stefan said finally, turning to Slane. "We've caused enough of a commotion as it is."

Sloane nodded in agreement, taking one last look at the paladin sitting on the bench, and left the scene of the fight behind.



As the terran and her companion made their escape from the scene of the fight, two figures hidden in the shadows watched them go. They were cloaked and hooded, their faces obscured by darkness. They whispered to each other in hushed tones, discussing what they had just witnessed

"Clearly, she has been training," Ressa said in a low voice. "That was a much better showing than anything from Marketbol."

And it was. The man the terran had clashed blades with had been absolutely abysmal, but she would give credit where it was due. The terran had improved dramatically since the last time Ressa had seen the woman fight.

"What's the play here, Commander?" Alexi asked.

Ressa thought for a moment, her mind racing with possibilities. "We need to find out what's going on here," she finally said. "But, first, we're going to use this to our advantage. Report this to the Guard as a concerned passerby. You saw a terran woman kill a paladin and then kill people who had tried to stop her."

He nodded. "Understood. What about the masks and weapons from the attackers?"

"I will take care of it," Ressa said, her eyes narrowing in determination.

The unknown assailants had granted them an unexpected boon, even in death. However, one of the things they had said was concerning.

They believe the raithe girl is an Avatar?

Then there was the fact that the masked men had killed a paladin... Even the Empire would hesitate to do so. Vlaredia did not oppose the Church, just the Guilds. The paladins were the one entity that citizens of the Empire believed was truly impartial.

If there is a schism in the Church... the Empire must be made aware.

She would need to get a message to the nearest army.



Sloane and Stefan hastened their pace as they returned to the inn, striving to avoid drawing any undue attention to themselves. She had no idea what to make of the situation, but she knew that it was time to talk with Mariel.

And hope the girl actually knew anything.

One thing the man had said was weighing on her though. That others were discovering their gifts... which clearly referred to magic use. How much had she missed in the last year?

The implications were concerning. She'd seen it first with the army that had besieged Marketbol, and their shield mages. Now, this organization had at least two. Groups were actively searching for mages and recruiting them.

That wasn't surprising, but it was not something she thought would be happening so soon. Although, both of those mages were weak, similar to the shield mages.

At first glance, she suspected that it had something to do with core quality. Perhaps it gave greater benefits than first supposed. The tests they had done at the Center had hinted at such advantages, but it appeared she needed to research it further.

Only she and Ressa had shown a higher level of magic ability. The Fist's issue was her lack of imagination. She'd clearly been unused to the idea of using magic, and did not know how to progress with it.

As she and Stefan walked, they exchanged a few words in hushed tones, discussing what had just happened and speculating on who was after Mariel. Stefan still wasn't sure, but she believed the attack on the paladins was a clue.

Sloane was still reeling from the fight, her heart pounding in her chest and her body tense with adrenaline. She couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched, that someone was following them in the shadows. But every time she turned to look, she saw nothing but the darkness of the night.

Finally, they reached the inn, and Sloane breathed a sigh of relief as they slipped inside unnoticed.

Sloane followed the raithe Blade up the stairs and to the room where Nemura waited with Mariel. Stefan knocked three times and backed away. After a short wait, the door creaked open and revealed Nemura, armed with a long dagger.

The two-meter-tall telv had a look of concern etched on her angular face as she gestured them inside. Mariel sat on the bed with Tiberius, her face tired and filled with worry as she held the metal falcon tight. Her eyes brightened as soon as she saw Sloane and Stefan.

“Thank the gods you’re back,” Mariel said, her voice weak but filled with relief. “I was starting to worry.”

“**Wryaat!**” the flying golem cried out in agreement.

Stefan glanced at Nemura. “What happened?”

The former Fist sheathed her blade and sighed. “Men came and broke into your room, Sloane. I had suspected something, so I moved everything into here beforehand. They didn’t get anything.”

Sloane sat down on the bed next to her and took Mariel’s hand. “We’re here now. Are you okay?”

Mariel nodded. “I’ll be fine. Just a bit shaken up.”

“We were attacked,” Sloane said, looking up at her guard. “The paladin was killed—”

The raithe girl gasped. “Th-they killed a paladin?”

“They did,” Stefan confirmed. The man had taken up a position leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. “Then they ambushed us and demanded we give you to them.”

“We dealt with them before coming back here,” Sloane told Nemura. She turned to Mariel and squeezed the girl’s hand. “Mariel, I think it’s time you’ve told us what is going on.”

The girl’s brows scrunched up. “I-I don’t know what you mean...”

“Mariel... We’ve been attacked multiple times now,” she said. “In order to keep you safe, we need to know what we are keeping you safe from.”

The girl pulled back her hand and sighed. “It’s because of my... my magic,” she murmured.

“What about your magic?” Nemura asked, her voice low and commanding. “Why do these people want you?”

The girl hesitated, and her eyes started darting around.

“Don’t worry, Mariel. We are here to protect you, this will help us do so,” Sloane reassured the girl. “We need to figure out who these people are and what they’re after.”

The young priestess-in-training closed her eyes and her lips moved, as if she were praying.

After a moment, Mariel opened her eyes and looked at Sloane with a mix of fear and resignation.

“My magic uses black mana,” she said softly. “And... there are those who believe that I am the Avatar of Tenera.”

Nemura's eyes widened. "The Avatar of Tenera? The goddess of night? What could you possibly—"

The girl lifted a hand, her eyes went black and suddenly all of the light in the room was dimmed until the flames of the lamps could be seen but they emitted no light beyond their form.

Sloane gasped, but then the light slowly returned as the girl let go of her spell. She looked at Sloane. "I can control darkness and shadows. I can make it a physical thing that can harm people," she explained. "But that isn't all..."

Stefan's hand was shaking. The raithe man seemed at a loss for words.

Mariel took a deep breath before continuing. "I can also..." Tears formed in the girl's eyes. "Please don't judge me..."

Sloane wrapped an arm around the girl and pulled her close. "We would never. Magic is just magic," she said, giving her two guards a look. They both quickly agreed.

The raithe girl nodded. "I..." She inhaled and exhaled. "I can raise the dead."

Oh. Shit.

She's a necromancer.



Nemura and Sloane sat downstairs, the two quietly drinking while they both tried to think of what to say. The two guards were struggling with the revelation, but they all knew that they had to be there for Mariel no matter what.

The telv woman took another long gulp of her drink, then set the glass down with uncharacteristic gentleness. "We need to keep this information to ourselves," she said quietly, still gazing down. "If people find out Mariel's abilities, it could put her—and us—in even more danger."

Sloane shook her head, reaching up to ensure the hood of her cloak didn't fall. "I'm not saying I disagree, but what else could happen? We clearly have a secret organization after her."

The woman looked up from her glass and stared at Sloane for a long moment before letting out a sigh. "I forget you are not from here," she said with a shake of her head. "If there is a schism in the church... there will be massive repercussions. The paladins will not let this stand. They will form an inquisition, and nations fall when that happens."

"And if they have the girl on their side, what?"

"It legitimizes them. We will see a true split in the Church, and nations will have to pick a side. Nations that historically align with Tenera, which is any with a

predominantly raithe or moon elf population, will easily rally behind this group. Westaren, many of the Sovereign Cities, and much of eastern Vlatedian Empire is home to a large amount of raithe. The Turest Order already cast out the Church a century ago, and their population is mainly raithe with a moon elf enclave nearby. Turest is an ally of the empire...”

Sloane sighs. “So, everything hinges on them getting Mariel. What is so important about Rosale?”

She didn’t get it. That they *had* to get Mariel there.

“The safety of Calling’s temple is ensured by the imposing fortress of Dawn’s Rise, which stands as a holy bastion in the kingdom of Rosale. The kingdom itself is one of the few places that was settled by the sun elves during the Loreni Diaspora. The fortress boasts an army of paladins sworn to protect Rosale’s citizens in the event of an invasion, though not its armies. Indeed, Rosale made this a prerequisite for hosting the paladins, and as a result, the temple is one of the most secure locations in the region.”

Sloane narrowed her eyes. “I thought the paladins were neutral.”

Nemura smirked. “They are supposed to be, but their oath to protect the innocent is stronger than their neutrality. And if they have to pick a side, they will choose the innocent.”

Sloane nodded slowly, taking it all in. “So, if Mariel is brought to Rosale, she’ll be safe?”

“Safer, yes,” Nemura corrected her. “But the journey there will be dangerous. And once we arrive, we have to ensure the paladins are aware of the seriousness.”

Sloane leaned back in her chair, the weight of the situation pressing down on her. “And what about the people after her? Do we know who they are?”

“Not yet,” Nemura admitted. “But we have a lead. We know they’re after Mariel because of her magic, specifically her ability to raise the dead. It’s a powerful and dangerous gift, and it’s likely they want to use her for their own purposes. That they are not afraid of the Church and have such knowledge of her means they are also part of the Church. We need to limit our interactions with them, except those of necessity.”

Sloane nodded grimly. “We’ll have to be careful, then. And we’ll have to protect Mariel at all costs.”

Nemura raised her glass in agreement. “To protecting the innocent.”

As they clinked their glasses, the door to the inn burst open and a group of armed guards rushed in. Sloane and Nemura immediately went quiet, observing the commotion. The guards scanned the room, their eyes landing on the two women.

“Excuse us,” the leader of the group said, approaching their table. He stared at Nemura with a serious expression. “We’re looking for a man and woman who were said to stay in this inn. The woman is a terr—”

He glanced at Sloane and his eyes went wide, his hand instantly reaching for his blade.

Nemura narrowed her eyes. “Is there a problem, guardsman?”

The man ignored her and stared down at Sloane. “Take off your hood.”

Sloane glanced up at Nemura, the woman gave her a subtle nod.

She reached up and slowly lowered her hood. “What do you need?”

“Where is your accomplice?” the man asked, ignoring her, drawing his blade. A quick glance showed that the other guards were doing the same.

Sloane raised an eyebrow. “My accomplice? I’m not sure what you mean.”

“The man you were with,” the guard clarified. “The two of you are wanted for the murder of a paladin and five other men.”

Sloane’s mind raced, Stefan was with Mariel. Even if she and Nemura were taken, they needed to keep Mariel safe...

He can do it. I trust him

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said slowly.

“Don’t lie to me,” the guard growled. “We have reason to believe you were seen together.”

Nemura made to stand, causing the other guards to tense. The woman spread her hands wide while she stood. “There must be some mistake. We’ve been here in the inn.”

The guard shook his head and glared at Sloane. “We have a witness who saw you both leaving the scene of the crime. You need to come with us.”

Sloane felt a pit in her stomach. They had to find a way out of this. “This would go much easier if you would stop threatening me, guardsman. Let’s all take a deep breath, and speak of this rationally. I am—”

The guard’s eyes narrowed. “We are aware of who you are, baroness.”

It was Sloane’s turn to be surprised. *How do they know who I am?*

“Now,” the guard said as he took a step back and pointed his blade at her. “Come with us quietly, or we’ll be forced to use force.”

Sloane and Nemura exchanged a look, silently agreeing to comply for now. They didn’t want to escalate the situation any further. Slowly, they got up from the table and allowed themselves to be led out of the inn and into the custody of the guards.



Stefan took a deep breath as he watched Nemura and Sloane walk with the City Guard and get into the back of an armored wagon. He knew he couldn't just stand there and do nothing. Mariel was still in danger, and he needed to figure out a way to help Sloane and Nemura as well. But for now, he had to focus on Mariel's safety.

Stefan turned to Mariel, who was nervously twirling a strand of hair between her fingers. "We need to get out of here," he said, his voice low.

Mariel nodded, looking up at him with wide eyes. "But where can we go? We don't know anyone in this city."

He sighed. "There is one place we can go," he said, uncertain. "Let's get our things. Cloak up. If anyone asks, you're my younger sister."

The young priestess quickly nodded. "Alright."

Stefan grabbed Sloane's satchel and backpack, slinging them over his shoulder. The contents were much too important to leave lying around. He looked over at the noblewoman's golem as she called it. "Tiberius, Sloane was taken," he said, feeling silly about talking to a metal bird. "We need to get help. I need you to come with us."

The bird cocked its head, before making jerking movements, as if searching for something with its obsidian eyes. It let out a series of chirps and then took off, flying over to him and landing on his shoulder.

"Stay close to me," he whispered to Mariel as he led her out of the inn and into the bustling street.

The journey to the Blade's Guild was tense, with Stefan keeping a watchful eye on their surroundings. He didn't trust anyone in the city at this point, not after what had just happened. As they walked, he explained the situation to Mariel; why they couldn't trust anyone, especially the Church.

If Sloane had already been apprehended, the City Guard would surely be on the hunt for him as well. The speed at which they had been located was perplexing, and Stefan couldn't shake the feeling that something was off.

I didn't think anyone had seen us... Stefan thought.

When they arrived at the Blade's Guild, Stefan approached the front desk with Mariel at his side. "I need to speak with the Guild Master. It's urgent," Stefan told the receptionist.

The telv man, a Blade in his own right, looked between Stefan, the falcon on his shoulder, and Mariel in turn. He closed the ledger in front of him and stood up from his seat. "Right this way," he said, gesturing towards a hallway.

Stefan followed him, Mariel close behind. As they walked, the Blade asked, "Do you have your badge?"

Stefan hesitated for a moment before nodding. He pulled out his Blade's Guild badge from his pocket and handed it to the telv man, who inspected it carefully before handing it back.

"Guildmaster Cross is in his office," the telv man said as he led them to a door at the end of the hallway. "I believe he's been expecting you, Blade Stranca."