

In Good Hands

The weeks went by, so much so that Sloane would have called them months on Earth. Alas, the calendar on Eona did not lend itself well to describing the passing of time. As the month and thus the season of Winter faded and Spring neared, it was as if the city had grown accustomed to the fact of being held prisoner by their enemy.

Strict rationing and management of supplies had forced even the wealthiest to adjust their standard of living. Beyond probing actions that happened occasionally, the Vlaredian army never truly attacked. They were content to wait the city out, for they knew a city of such size would eventually capitulate. Its own citizens would force it to do so. The city, it seemed, was on a time limit. One that if asked before the siege, was a situation the city would inevitably win. Yet, beyond the rare sighting of Sovereign scouts, the promised army from Mogogale did not show. Oh, the city leadership and army spoke of what could only be the reasons, such as a harsh winter, or any number of other lies they liked to tell the masses to keep them hopeful.

Sloane had spent the entire month working on her projects, and the remainder was spent locked down either within her small manor or on campus. Ressa had only attacked twice in the long season. Once on a supply warehouse that held materiel for the army, and another on a random government facility in the Central Quarter. One within a short walking distance of Sloane's new house. *She's clearly trying to make a statement.*

Her idea of checking the buildings for false walls had not panned out. In fact, everyone was completely stumped at how the woman could continually hide with such success.

Frustration hit her. *Would have lost that bet...*

She sighed as her thoughts almost broke her **Meditation**. A spell she had learned over the winter, one that let her relax and helped her after strenuous uses of mana. She could contemplate during the spell, but she couldn't get too worked up, otherwise, the spell would break. Her people's near-constant use of mana had led her and the alchemists to make two *very* important discoveries. However, before that, they had learned several things.

Most of her House had taken her and the church's offer up on performing the ceremony on her people. They had learned all of their key attributes. Ernard had jokingly called them the

Three-Cs and it happened to stick amongst the guards and some of the others. They were *capability*, *constitution*, and hers, *control*. More and more, she scrutinized everything through the lens of what she knew from roleplaying games, seeing ways to direct their research toward possibilities. Research into these attributes led them to learn that everyone had all three of them, but they had one that was the primary focus of their path.

Capability affects the physical or magical *ability* of the person. Physically, it meant they were stronger, and while Sloane had long realized her magic strength was variable based on her needs, capability seemed to affect its potential.

Constitution changed the body. The strength of someone's skin and how much it could be abused before being damaged were the first things they noticed. Those with higher constitution also seemed less likely to get sick according to her alchemists and Maud. Another aspect they noticed the attribute affected was one's stamina. There were also two types of stamina. The typical physical stamina, which dictated how long someone could exert themselves, and mental stamina. Mental stamina was tricky to research. However, Maud and she had quickly realized that mental stamina was linked to their ability to cast spells, and why she had worked to learn her **Meditation** spell to help... regenerate it quicker. *It definitely helps with the migraines I get from the overuse of mana.*

Huh. This makes it quite similar to what I would consider a mana pool if mana actually accumulated within us in such a way. I wonder if there are mana related illnesses that come from pushing too hard for too long.

The last attribute was control, and this also affected the body. It made someone more perceptive and have finer *control* of their body and reactions. For the few magic users they had, it allowed for increased mana and spell efficiency.

Sloane wished they had more magic users to test with.

The first thing she did when learning this was to consult her watch. While she wasn't able to figure out exact numbers, she had figured out that her control was significantly higher than her capability or constitution. For her at least, her second most attribute was two-thirds the value of her control, while the least was a third.

This unfortunately did not hold up after testing others, and she was not sure what contributed to the attributes. They learned the most when they focused on people with a

physical alignment. It gave them a larger sample set to measure. What they learned was that paths seemed to affect the key attributes of people, while the core quality seemed to affect how *many* attributes they had. *The core quality seems awfully close to rarity. Perhaps rarity affects how many stats you gain per level–step.*

When they looked at core qualities, they discovered three different ones. *Common*, *Uncommon*, and *Rare*. She was the only person with a rare core, while only six members of the House and knights combined had uncommon. Nemura and Ismeld were the only *fighters* of her inner circle with that quality, while the alchemist Kemmy was the only *artisan* with one. The remaining three were two guards with one of the senior guardsmen having a *leader* purpose. The last was one of Elodie's managers she had hired for the Runecard business. That telv had a *bureaucrat* purpose, which had prompted Sloane to ask Adaega to organize a list of people with their purposes, but was surprised to find out the woman had already done so.

Of their members, they had leaders, bureaucrats, artisans, workers, fighters, two rogues, a healer, and of course, an innovator. She suspected there were more, but that would come in time.

Additionally, when testing the guards, they learned that people with the same le–step and path or purpose had similar levels of stats. They weren't exact, but they were close enough to do tests. They then included people with similar purposes but different steps. What they learned here was... incredible.

Attributes affected people differently. Someone with similar capability, but was already stronger than another person, would maintain that difference. That said, someone who had previously been weaker, may be stronger if the difference in levels was enough.

Testing *this* had brought on another revelation. Sloane knew that she was at a much higher level than Deryk. Her core quality was at first glance two levels higher, which meant her attributes were higher... or so she had believed.

She'd tried competing against him by lifting a series of weights that Koren, their smith, had made.

Deryk had demolished her. While Sloane definitely lifted more than she ever even considered on Earth, his was more. What that had allowed them to realize, and after testing Maud and Gisele, was that the alignment affected the attributes more than they had first

considered. It seemed that alignment dictated how mana affected someone, and whether the attribute would affect someone mentally or physically. As Gisele was a *hybrid* alignment, they suspected that her attributes equally contributed to both her mental and physical improvements.

Even with Deryk's lower level and core quality, her stats were not enough to overcome his physical capability.

A knock resounded on the door to her office and she opened her eyes and turned her head. Sloane felt her **Meditation** recede as the door opened and the young telv woman that Adaega had assigned as her assistant popped her head in.

"I apologize for disturbing you, m'lady."

Sloane smiled and pushed off the ground to help herself stand. "It is no bother. What can I do for you?"

"Your meeting with alchemist Kemilla is scheduled to begin soon."

Sloane squinted and glanced out the large window of her office. *Huh. More time passed than I had thought.* She had been meditating for almost four hours or bells it seemed.

"I will be right there, please allow me to clean up."

"Of course, m'lady," the young woman said with a bow of her head.

Sloane looked around and then moved to grab her cloak. It was still chilly out, even if it was early spring.

* * *

"Lady Sloane! Welcome, welcome. We're ready for you in the back," Rel said as she entered the Alchemy Hall. Nodding to the young high elf man who occupied the front desk as she passed, Sloane followed Rel through a set of double doors into the heart of the hall. Inside was a hive of activity. She immediately noticed Kemmy moving around directing the alchemists

and the apprentices in their various jobs. She saw several apprentices working on batches of what looked like enchanting ink. Another group was working with large beakers that had a small glass tube at the top that led into another, larger, collection jar.

“Kem! Lady Sloane’s here,” Rel called out.

“Thanks, Rel,” Sloane said to the orkun woman, smiling. The woman was slowly warming up to the idea of working with the other alchemists. For all that Rel enjoyed spending time with others from the campus, she surprisingly did not transfer that to her work life. She was very solitary and only preferred to work with her partner, Kemmy.

The raithe woman perked up and looked over from where she was standing next to one of the bubbling beakers that appeared to be filled with boiling water. *Huh, is she distilling the water?*

Kemmy took off her thick gloves and walked over. “Lady Sloane! Perfect! Just in time too.”

Sloane smiled. “What is your team working on? I see you have moved the apprentices to enchanting ink production. And... Distilling water?”

The raithe seemingly lit up. “Yes! So, enchanting ink is fairly easy to produce, and with the greenhouses you had the city set up, our source of silden fern is pretty secure. Now, what we are working on here is something truly *magical*. The distilled water is being used for an elixir that Rel accidentally discovered. We are refining the process and attempting to make a more potent and effective product.”

Sloane’s brows knit together. “What did she accidentally discover?”

Rel sighed. “I was attempting to make a tonic and grabbed the wrong items to filter the water with. Since I was absolutely exhausted, I confused two of the canisters. Instead of crushed stone and sand, I used our supply of crushed crystals that had been infused with mana...”

Sloane’s eyes widened. “What happened?”

Kemmy chuckled. “It created a weak tonic that when ingested—”

“Wait! You *drank* it?” Sloane asked, concerned.

The raithe waved her off. “Yes, of course. We know that it will not harm someone. We have tested it before.”

Sloane’s mouth dropped. *Just what kind of unsafe operations are they... Oh, yeah... safety regulations wouldn’t have formed for a long time yet.* The thought of what they were doing without proper precautions did not sit right with her. Adaega would need to implement safety standards throughout the campus. Sloane sighed lightly. *More stuff for that poor woman.*

“Okay. So, what happened?” she asked, lightly massaging her temple.

“It gave me energy! It did not help *much*, but it was like I was ready to work more.” *So she made an energy drink? Mana-based caffeine substitute?*

Kemmy was nodding along. “We did more tests. Remember our discussion about *stamina* and how mana affects it?”

“Yes...”

“This tonic replenishes it. We created two different versions with different ingredients. Also, the crushed mana crystal has to be infused with mana from different sources. So we used different cores to infuse the crystals. We now have a supply of crushed crystals of every type of mana. However, the two that are most important for us are green and blue,” Kemmy explained.

Sloane thought about it but came away with nothing. Chemistry was *not* her area of expertise. The raithe directed her over to the table where a telv alchemist was pouring the freshly distilled water through a filter made from crushed stone that glowed slightly blue. Below that was a jar filled with an assortment of plants.

“Here we have some other plants that have been saturated in mana-infused soil similar to the ferns we use for the enchanting ink. The House herbalist—”

“We have a House herbalist?” Sloane asked, not aware they had hired someone specifically for that function.

“Yes. I asked Ms. Adaega to hire one just after the first greenhouse was erected. He has been cultivating the House’s supply of magical plants for some time while also working with the City to improve methods. He is the one that took your idea of saturating the soil with powdered

and crushed mana crystals and then using green cores to channel mana into them during the process.”

“Huh. I thought that was you,” she admitted. It had been some time since she had discussed the subject with the alchemists, and Sloane had been busy since. It was one of those things where she came up with initial ideas and simply let her people run with them. There were far too many projects to manage every aspect herself. Especially with how hands-on she had to be with the runework.

“At first it was, then after we hired the herbalist, he and I worked together to improve the process. We started with what we knew, then moved on to a variety of other plant types. Some seem to work well with mana, while others do not have a noticeable reaction. Oh, here, observe,” she said, indicating the alchemist working on the elixir.

The telv mixed the heated water and the plants together. As he did, the water started taking on a glow. After a few minutes of mixing, the man grabbed the large jar with his gloved hands and carefully poured it into a funnel and strainer set into a small glass bottle. Once he filled up the bottle nearly full, he moved down the row of more that had been set up for that purpose. Kemmy put a glove back on and grabbed the first bottle.

“Now, we use a bit of magic...”

Sloane knew that Kemmy was one of the few in the House with both a mental alignment and an uncommon core quality. Her attunement was green, and her domains were artifice and abjuration. Rel, herself with a common quality core, was another mental aligned person also attuned to green mana but had the alteration domain.

She watched as the raithe’s eyes seemed to have a glowing tinge to them. Her fingertips also gained a subtle green glow as she held onto the bottle. The liquid inside swirled and then took on a brighter glow, one that reminded her of a blue glow stick in the dark. Kemmy placed the bottle back into the wooden rack. Sloane couldn’t help but grin as she saw the big smile on the woman’s face.

“So, that’s it? What did you do with your magic?” Sloane asked.

“That’s it! We have found that magical alchemical substances *will* work on their own, but when guided and strengthened with our spells, they will last longer and become more potent. Would you care to test it?”

Sloane squinted as she looked between her two trailblazing alchemists. *Ah, what the hell.*

“This blue liquid, I presume this is the mental stamina elixir?”

Kemmy nodded. “It is!”

Sloane took a deep breath. “I will need to exhaust myself first, and that may be difficult in here.

Rel chuckled. “We already suspected. Come, we had Koren set up a testing area for you, specifically.”

“What?” She asked, finding herself confused yet again.

The two women laughed and Kemmy asked her to go with them to somewhere they had set up. She sighed as she found herself following the two partners out the rear of the Alchemy Hall and along the perimeter wall. They turned to the right and headed in the direction of the Guard Hall.

As they entered the small tree-filled area between the two halls, she noticed a newly cleared area back near the outer wall. There was a new stone pad in the area with a wall that was erected along the rear. There were lines painted onto the stone floor at set intervals that lined up with the obelisks placed along the edges of the roughly ten-meter-long area set a meter apart. The wall was made of solid stone that appeared to be around six meters wide, half as thick, and was set into the ground where it rose five meters.

She glanced at the raithe woman next to her. “What is this?”

The woman nodded. “This was built with you in mind. You should be able to use just about any spell you have on it. We had Orthan practice some of his enchanting on it. He placed several runes that should help withstand your magic.”

Sloane perked up. She remembered Adaega mentioning that the young man had been practicing his runework. With a pep in her step, she stepped onto the pad and walked past a circle curiously painted onto the stone as she moved over to the wall.

Along the wall were thin bands of steel placed every half meter. Sloane whistled as she saw the runic chains written into the bands. She saw a plethora of runes in each of the bands. The immediately obvious ones were **[Strengthen]** and another that she had only just recently theorized about: **[Spell-Resist]**. One she hoped would dampen the effects of magic against armor utilizing the enchantment. A must for the knights, but one that unfortunately would not do as much against the conjured objects that Ressa utilized. Ironically, it would help them more against someone like her with her arcane-based spells.

“What do you think?” A voice called out from her right.

Adaega walked up, with several other people in tow. With her were all of the main people of her House and the knights. Another group of people was behind them, and she caught sight of General Irileth and several other officers of the army she recognized. A smaller group included several members of the City Council. They all held expectant expressions... *suspiciously so*.

Sloane narrowed her eyes. “This is suspicious.”

The dark-skinned terran laughed. “We all planned this. This is officially the spell-testing area. It was quite expensive in materials, but I think it will be worth it.” She glanced at the young telv and smiled. “I am especially proud of the work Orthan put into it.”

“Thank you, Ms. Adaega. Lady Reinhart, I hope it meets your expectations,” the boy said.

Sloane chuckled. “Seeing as how I had no idea that it was being constructed, I’d say I have none.”

“You should see what it can do. The obelisks in particular! I want to take this concept and use it back home,” Gisele said with excitement.

Sloane glanced over at the little obelisks that she had originally ignored as simple markers. They were almost a meter tall, and clearly had runes designed into them. As she walked closer, she noticed red cores built into them. She narrowed her eyes and looked closer as she squatted in front of one, seeing two runes she recognized followed by one she didn’t. Glancing up at Orthan, she asked, “You used **[Store:(Spell)]**? I do not recognize the spell...”

“I did, Lady Reinhart. Ser Gisele provided aid,” he said.

Her eyes widened as she realized what that implied. “No... Is there a mana crystal in here?”

Adaega nodded. “Yes. Each obelisk is powered by crystals. This is not just a testing area, it’s a test bed for an entirely new way of defending cities. It was also a way for us to test our ability to design these experiments without your direct involvement. However, you are currently the only one that can test the effectiveness.”

Giddiness rose within her as she looked around. The large group of people was gathering at the front of the pad as they patiently waited on her. She turned back toward the group and saw a little pedestal off to the side.

Adaega gestured at the small pedestal and Sloane approached. “This is the control for it. Would you like to do the honors?”

Sloane shook her head. “No. Orthan? Come here.”

The boy tilted his head but then nodded. He stepped next to her and looked down at it, before pressing a button that had a **[Trigger]** rune built into it.

The entire pad *thrummed* with power as the runes on the obelisks glowed red and those on the wall glowed blue. The obelisks flashed once but then walls of red energy that were identical to those that Gisele utilized rose on either side of the pad. Everyone present gasped as the walls rose to the same height as the rear wall and stabilized. Sloane was impressed. Her people had built this without her knowing and managed to deliver an entirely new mana-based technology. Actually, she was *really* impressed. While Sloane immediately saw several ways to improve upon the design, what they were doing wasn’t about that.

This was about her people standing on their own, and showing her that they could do something she could be proud of. That she didn’t need to worry about them after leaving on her search for Gwyn. Her friends and members of her House here knew that. She felt tears forming as she turned and gazed at the faces of those in the crowd. What she saw was pride, fascination, and hope. Sloane glanced at the woman with a beaming smile.

“Was this your doing, Adaega?” Sloane asked.

She didn't miss Ernard squeezing the woman's hand before standing straighter, her happiness grew. The two had entered into a relationship and Sloane enjoyed watching the two lovers interact. She still remembered the day that they announced it to everyone. Adaega's glow would not go away. Sloane and Ismeld had, of course, given Ernard no shortage of hell when they'd found out Adaega had to finally be the one to make a move because the sun elf knight was a bit... slow in realizing his own feelings. *You go girl.*

Nadia and Elodie stepped up behind the woman, with Elodie resting a supportive hand on Adaega's shoulder, another act that made Sloane smile. The sun elf and raithe had become close friends of her director, the three of them could always be seen together either working or simply enjoying each other's company.

Adaega nodded. "Yes, Lady Reinhart. After we gathered the data concerning all of the members of the House I sought a way to really showcase what the House and the Reinhart Center could do. This was a collaborative effort from everyone, and each person gave valuable inputs and insight into how their abilities would make it work."

"Speech!" a female voice called out from the crowd.

Sloane fake glared in the direction it came from, looking for Gisele. *That rascal. She knows I hate public speaking.*

Sloane stepped forward, addressing all those gathered, "This is impressive. Truly, I am astonished at how polished and well-done this technology is. Never mind the fact you managed to do it in between all the other stuff I have been bothering the lot of you with." She chuckled as a not-insignificant amount of laughter came from the crowd.

She took a deep breath, the words that would mean the most coming to her. "Reinhart Center was a concept that I thought would allow like-minded people to come together and bring an improved quality of life to everyone, everywhere. A place of learning and research that would dive into the mysteries of this strange, fantastical phenomenon called Mana. A place that could be a refuge of safety for other terrans like myself and Adaega. A hub where new friends can come together to create wondrous items and works of true magic." Other members of the House approached, gathering together as she spoke. A smattering of applause made her pause.

She smiled as her eyes skimmed over the growing crowd. Sloane continued, “My fear since arriving has been of what I leave behind. As all of you know, my time here in Marketbol is not permanent. I have a journey I must undergo, one that leads me far from here.

“In a short amount of time, this center has grown from a mere idea and a small group of people, into a respectable institute of development and progress. I could not be more proud of each and every one of you. What you all are doing to support each other and this city is simply inspiring. With Adaega Merbaker and Elodie Romaris, House Reinhart and its Marketbol Center are in capable hands. However, we could not have gotten this far if it were not for all of you. To those of House Reinhart and those who support what we have built here, I thank you. To those within the city’s leadership that took a chance, I hope you see the potential of what is to come. You took a chance on a few women who wanted something *more*. This is only the beginning, and I cannot wait for the world to see what House Reinhart has in store. Everyone, from the bottom of my heart... thank you.” She crossed her hands over her heart and bowed her head. People started clapping, but she raised her hands and everyone quieted.

She grinned. “Now, who wants to see how well this works?”

Sloane spun around and snap-fired a **Mana Bolt** at the wall. The crackling purple orb flew out and burst against the wall in a flash of energy and light. A cascade of shimmering blue energy spread from the focal point as the wall’s enchantments performed their function perfectly. Not even a smidge of damage appeared. She smirked as she pulled at her mana, letting it build, before casting an **Arcane Barrage**. Blast after blast slammed into the wall, and she swung her hand to the side, letting several of the bolts burst against the shielding in a satisfying crackle of energy. She formed a series of **Mana Bolts** over her shoulders even as her barrage continued and launched them on a spiraling path that slammed all down the length of the shields and into the stone wall.

Cheering erupted from behind her and she laughed. The wall and the shield stood resolute. *Let’s see how much abuse this can take.*

She launched into a series of spells, pulling more and more at her mana. The wall held up, but she saw that the shimmering had dimmed very slightly. As she continued, she felt the slow inexorable arrival of exhaustion. Easily half a bell of casting was starting to take its toll, and she glanced, seeing everyone still glued to the impromptu show she was giving them.

A tap on her shoulder brought her head around, seeing Kemmy. Rel stepped right behind Sloane next to Adaega, blocking her view of the crowd.

“Lady Sloane. Here,” the raithe whispered.

She handed Sloane a cloth, and Sloane squinted her eyes.

“For your nose.”

Dabbing her nose, she winced as she saw the small drops of blood. “Did anyone—”

“No. Here, drink this.”

Kemmy handed Sloane the bottle and Sloane’s eyes widened. In the excitement of the spell-testing area, she’d forgotten about the elixir. *It was the whole reason... Oh... no wonder she’d been working so hard on it. She was trying to make sure it was done before this event.*

Well played, Kemmy.

Sloane pulled out the glass stopper and lifted the bottle to her lips. Closing her eyes, she tipped it back and drained the entire thing. Sloane wanted to gag at the taste, it reminded her of cough medicine, but... smoother. She winced but then her eyes widened as she felt it. A warm feeling raced toward her body’s connection to mana. When it reached her core, it felt as if someone had massaged a soothing cream on a sore muscle. A sensation of relief followed along her core’s pathways and spread throughout her body. She pulled at mana and felt as if she could cast nonstop all over again.

Sloane laughed loudly. Darting to the small woman next to her, she grabbed Kemmy in a hug, before lifting the smaller raithe woman and spinning her around. Rel quickly raised her hands in surrender as Sloane set her partner down. Sloane chuckled and turned back toward the crowd.

She knew she wore a big goofy grin as she addressed everyone, and she didn’t care. “Wonders never cease within House Reinhart. I am sure all of you know them, but for those who do not, allow me to introduce Kemilla Bratianu and Rel Sha’rak. Kemmy is the department head of our Alchemy Hall. She oversees all of the center’s efforts concerning the field of alchemy and now herbalism. For those that aren’t aware, these two amazing women discovered the formula

for enchanting ink. The same ink that is used throughout all of the city's defensive efforts provided by the center."

A collection of satisfying gasps came from the crowd. General Irileth took a step forward, seemingly realizing that Sloane was about to drop another big discovery.

She motioned both of the women forward, and they stepped to either side of her. "Mana. It affects us all in different ways. Now, one of the main ways it does affect us is physically or even mentally. Every time we perform actions, we exert ourselves and use up our stamina. Every mana ability used or spell we cast, uses either *physical* or *mental stamina*."

Sloane pointed at the second bottle that Rel held. "Rel discovered, and then Kemmy helped formulate elixirs that will replenish this crucial resource within ourselves. Just now, I was pushing myself to my limits as I cast my spells. I nearly drove myself to exhaustion... Something that I think the knights here can tell stories of the times that I have done so before. Drinking one of these elixirs completely reversed that. Imagine, the army is on the walls, fighting for days as the Vlaredians attempt to breach. Give the soldiers these elixirs and while they may eventually tire, their capacity to use their abilities or even spells would not diminish. They would outlast the enemy.

"Elixirs... potions... there are so many other potentials in the field of alchemy. Ser Maud has been seen using her magic to heal at the temple. Imagine, a potion that channeled that same kind of magic, and let anyone heal themselves with a concoction. Imagine the possibilities if you supplied your army with healing potions, physical... stamina, and... mana stamina elixirs. Imagine the potential of every doctor who had these for treating people who before now had to wait for a miracle. What would this world look like?" She had stumbled on the names slightly, but no one seemed to notice. *I'll let the alchemists determine names.*

The crowd stood stunned. No one spoke for a moment, and then it erupted in a cacophony of voices. She heard Kemmy whisper to her side. "Is that truly possible?"

Sloane nodded, glancing at the redheaded knight healer. "Yes. If mana can allow Ser Maud to use magic to heal almost any wound? I am positive it is possible with alchemy." *Never mind the fact that I am literally just pulling from fantasy stories back home.*

Rel took a deep breath from her other side. "This is going to be a lot of work."

Kemmy laughed. "I can't wait."

Sloane shook her head, grinning. "I can't either."