

Three

Loss

Sloane's consciousness flickered, pain searing through her like wildfire. Her world was reduced to agony and confusion, her vision blurred and obscured by dancing flames. The air was thick with the stench of burning wood and flesh, the roar of fire mingled with the cries of unseen monsters and the distant clatter of combat.

In that haze of pain and disorientation, Sloane's thoughts, fragmented and disjointed, spiraled around one constant, anchoring concern—Mariel. Her daughter, her bright, curious, mischievous Mariel, who had been on this very ship with her, where was she now? Was she safe? Had she escaped the fiery hellscape that their haven in the skies had become?

The thought of Mariel, potentially lost or hurt, pierced through Sloane's own physical agony, igniting a spark of maternal fear that burned hotter than any flame. She wanted to call out, to scream Mariel's name, to hear her daughter's voice respond amid the cacophony of disaster and assure her that she was alright.

But when Sloane attempted to voice her fears, to shout for her child, no coherent sounds emerged, just a strangled croak eclipsed by a sharp intake of breath as a new wave of pain crashed over her. Only when that pain peaked did a cry escape her lips, a sound raw and primal that mingled with the symphony of chaos around her.

She tried to move, to rise, but her body betrayed her, rooted in place by injury and shock. Her left arm screamed in anguish, a white-hot lance of torment that anchored her to the ground. Through the haze of her suffering, she could discern shapes moving against the backdrop of flames, shadows locked in a deadly dance.

Her eyes, blurred by tears of pain and desperation, darted around, seeking any familiar form in the maelstrom. Voices reached her, muffled and growing distant, distorted by the roar of destruction. She strained to make sense of them, to find a lifeline in the chaos, but consciousness was a fleeting thing, slipping away as darkness claimed her once more.



Manabound - Crucible

When next she awoke, the scene had changed. The fire was gone, replaced by the concerned face of an orkun woman leaning over her. Confusion warred with pain in Sloane's mind as she peered up at the stranger.

"Gisele?" she whispered, her voice hoarse, the name of her friend emerging from a well of memory and hope.

The woman's brow furrowed in confusion or concern—Sloane couldn't tell which. Then she realized.

This wasn't Gisele.

Her mind, grappling with the pain and disorientation, latched onto any fragment of normalcy, any tether to the life she knew before the crash.

The woman's eyes were intense as she scanned Sloane's injuries with practiced ease, her hands moving deftly to check for other wounds, her touch surprisingly gentle. Sloane tried to speak again, to ask about her daughter, about the others, but her throat was raw, her voice barely a rasp.

"Please," she managed, a plea more than a question, her gaze desperate as it met the orkun's. "Mar—"

"I'm going to help you, Reinhart," the woman reassured. "Just stay still. You're safe now."

She... she knows who I am?

But safety was a relative term, Sloane knew. Her thoughts whirled, fixating on Mariel, her vibrant, mischievous daughter. Was she safe? Had she survived the crash unscathed? The absence of her presence, the lack of her laughter or chatter, was a void that yawned wide and terrifying in Sloane's heart.

Not again. I can't lose another daughter...

She tried to move, but that was when the pain came. Like nothing she'd felt before.

The woman placed a hand on her chest and held her down as Sloane grit her teeth. And as quickly as it started, the pain became too much. As she slipped away again, her last coherent thought was a silent prayer to any deity listening, a mother's desperate bargain for the safety of her child.



When Sloane's eyes fluttered open again, the scene before her was one of chaos and carnage. The ground was torn up, evidence of the fierce battle that had taken place. Trees around them were scorched and splintered, and the air was thick with magic and the scent of blood.

Oxylus

Through her blurred vision, Sloane could see the orkun woman standing tall amidst the devastation, her body tense, ready for the next wave of attack. The woman's magic swirled around her in a vivid display of yellow and green mana with a level of control that surprised Sloane.

A roar shattered the tense silence, and a hulking shape emerged from the shadows. Sloane's heart pounded in her chest. Her vision blackened, but when it cleared she saw the beast being hit by magic she couldn't identify.

Then Sloane saw movement out the corner of her eye. A large feline creature with horns was moving toward the woman. Despite her injuries, Sloane felt a surge of resolve. She couldn't just lie there while this stranger risked her life. Ignoring the searing pain in her arm, she summoned her remaining strength and focused her mana.

With a cry that was more determination than sound, she unleashed a **[Mana Bolt]**, the spell cutting through the air with deadly accuracy. It hit the creature, causing it to stagger, its attention momentarily diverted from the orkun woman.

She cast another two before the creature collapsed as limply as her arm. The orkun's gaze snapped to her, a mixture of surprise and newfound respect flickering in her eyes before darkness swept Sloane away once more.



The fire crackled, casting a warm, flickering light over the makeshift camp. Sloane's senses slowly knitted back together, the warmth seeping into her chilled bones as she lay propped against a makeshift support. The orkun woman, her features softened by concern, watched over her, administering aid with a steady hand.

"Where's Mariel?" Sloane asked slowly, the urgency clear in her voice despite the hoarseness. The faces of her daughter and friends etched in her mind, their fates uncertain, amplifying her fear and helplessness.

The woman's expression remained unreadable, her eyes reflecting the flames as she replied, "I don't know. I found you alone. We got separated from the others by monsters." Her voice was steady, offering a solidity that Sloane clung to amidst her swirling thoughts.

Sloane's mind raced, piecing together fragmented memories of the crash, of the chaos that followed. Had Mariel managed to escape? Was she out there somewhere, lost and afraid? The questions churned in her gut, a maelstrom of worry and guilt.

She looked up at the woman, but her vision was still blurry, but there was something about her. Something familiar.

“Do I know you?” Sloane rasped.

The orkun woman gently pressed the wooden cup to Sloane’s lips again, urging her to drink. The woman’s eyes darted to Sloane’s left for a moment. “Focus on recovering,” she advised. “You’ve been through a lot. We’ll search for your daughter and the others when you’re stronger.”

Sloane sipped the water, each swallow easing the dryness in her throat but doing little to quell the storm inside her. She closed her eyes, leaning back against the makeshift support, her mind adrift in a sea of uncertainty and let sleep claim her once more.



Consciousness crept back to Sloane in increments, a slow resurgence from the black depths of unconsciousness to the harsh light of reality. Her eyelids fluttered open, granting her a blurred view of her surroundings. She lay on a makeshift bed, the world around her spinning slightly as her senses tried to catch up.

As clarity gradually infiltrated her mind, a dull throb echoed along her left side, a persistent reminder that something was wrong, terribly wrong. With a groan, Sloane shifted, intending to push herself up, to assess her situation with her own eyes. Her right hand pressed against the ground, coarse and gritty beneath her palm, seeking leverage. Instinctively, her left arm moved to assist, but what should have been a coordinated effort ended in a jarring halt.

Confusion furrowed her brow as she looked down, her heart rate picking up, breath hitching in her throat. There, wrapped in blood-stained fabric, was the truncated remnant of her left arm. The realization crashed into her with the force of a physical blow, a visceral punch that sucked the air from her lungs.

Her arm, her dominant arm, the one that had crafted so many enchantments, fought so many battles, was gone. Reduced to a stump that ended just above where her elbow once was. The sight was so stark, so definitively final, that for a moment, Sloane couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. Panic clawed at her insides like a desperate, animalistic fear that gnawed at her composure.

Memories of the crash flooded back—flashes of fire and screams, the jarring impact, and then darkness. Had she lost it then? In those chaotic, final moments before the world went black? The specifics eluded her, lost in a haze of pain and fear, but the result was unmistakably clear.

How did I survive?

Tears welled in her eyes, spilling over unchecked as she stared at the remnant of her arm. Grief welled up inside her, a torrent of loss and despair that threatened to overwhelm her. What was she going to do now? How could she hope to face the challenges ahead, to protect her daughters, to fight her battles? To craft?

In that desolate moment, as the reality of her situation bore down upon her, Sloane Reinhart felt a vulnerability she hadn't known in years. She was wounded, incomplete, and for the first time in a long time, truly afraid she may not make it.

A renewed panic gripped her, a suffocating, visceral fear that clawed at her chest, stealing her breath. She felt herself spiraling, her mind racing, her body hyperventilating as if trying to flee from the immutable truth of her loss.

Then the orkun woman was there, her face swimming into Sloane's tear-blurred vision, her voice a grounding force amid the tempest of Sloane's panic. "Reinhart, breathe. You need to breathe."

The command, stern yet not unkind, pierced the fog of Sloane's distress. Gradually, her breathing steadied and she regained a semblance of control, her racing heart slowing as she anchored herself to the orkun woman's words.

She looked up and really took in the woman.

Recognition flickered through Sloane's pain-clouded eyes. Followed by fear.

Ressa?

"Y-You." She sucked in a breath, trying to focus. "Ressa," she hissed. The name slipped out. Her hackles rose as she reflexively moved to defend herself. She drew upon her mana, her core responding despite her injuries. Her right hand raised almost on its own.

Ressa's reaction was immediate, her expression shifting to one of cautious understanding and slowly spread her arms wide. "Reinhart, lower your damn hand. I'm not here to hurt you." When Sloane's hand formed a **[Mana Bolt]**, Ressa didn't flinch but met her gaze steadily. "Really? You can barely move. And I'm not here as your enemy. Let me explain before I have to knock your ass out."

Sloane narrowed her eyes. "You have one minute," she conceded, albeit with a note of authority.

Ressa's frustration was brief but evident. "You aren't in a position to negotiate, Reinhart," she snapped.

"Fifty seconds," Sloane countered, unmoved.

With a curse under her breath, Ressa launched into her explanation. "You're infuriating. I saved your damn life." When Sloane didn't respond, she cursed again. "Listen, I'm on a mission to Avira. Our nations are at war. The Union's ceasefire with Vlaredia changes things between you and I.

We are not enemies at this moment. Get over yourself and lower your hand. If I wanted to kill you, I could have done it any time before now.”

Sloane's gaze sharpened, memories of conflict and loss surfacing. “Setting aside whatever the ‘Union’ is, you tried to kill us.”

“And you have killed my countrymen,” Ressa retorted with an even tone. “You *were* granted citizenship in Marketbol and helped them in the war. You are not some *victim* so do not act like it. You were an enemy combatant and we were on opposite sides of a conflict. We both conducted our fighting honorably. Now, circumstances have changed.”

The tension between them lingered as Sloane processed her words, eventually allowing the **[Mana Bolt]** to dissipate. “Why save me?” she asked, her curiosity piqued despite herself.

Ressa's response was pragmatic. “I can't deny how strong you are with your magic. This island is filled with monsters, it seems, and our survival may hinge on your abilities. I just need to get you back on your feet. Besides, your journey aligns with mine. It's in our mutual interest to cooperate, especially since it allows me to stand out less if I am with you. If I had another option, believe me, I'd take it.”

Sloane filed away the important parts of that and ignored the jab at the end. “What happened to my arm?”

The matter of Sloane's grievous injury was broached with a wince from Ressa. “The crash nearly severed your arm. I did what was necessary to save your life, though my magic couldn't spare your limb. Perhaps if your redheaded Blighter friend that left you in Swanbrook were here she may have saved it.”

I wish all of the knights were here... Wait—How does she know about Swanbrook?

She almost said something but held herself back. It wasn't the time.

“You truly don't know where my daughter is?” Sloane's voice was a whisper, laden with fear for Mariel's safety.

“Kho'lin is resilient. I'd bet my last coin she and your daughter are together, somewhere safe.” The conviction in her voice provided a semblance of comfort, though Sloane's gut churned with worry for Mariel and the others.

But she was right, Nemura Kho'lin was tough and her friend would rather die than let Mariel get harmed. Thinking back on what happened on the skyship, she knew Nemura had enough time to reach Mar before things went to hell. While she wasn't sure if Ressa was just placating her to make her more receptive, she couldn't help but feel hope that everyone else was indeed okay.

Sloane formed a fist and looked down at it, unable to look at what was left of her left arm. She wasn't sure if Ressa was placating her or what, but she did know that Nemura would die rather than let

Maribel get harmed. She knew Nemura had rushed to Maribel before the crash, so if they got together then she had to hope that they survived.

“Do you know where we are?” she asked, looking back up at the woman.

“We’re on the island of Astrarest, I believe we’re heading in the right direction, but I’ve never been here. I initially tried to go west back toward the coast where we came from, but that was when you woke up while I was fighting off those beasts. Thank you for the assistance there, by the way...”

Sloane nodded.

Ressa continued, “So, I had to turn back. We’re now heading east toward the center of the island. There’s the town of Auvergne there. Hopefully we can get supplies and hopefully meet with any other survivors.” Sloane finally glanced down at her stump. Ressa addressed it. “You lost a lot of blood, but I think you’ll be fine. I had some healing salve that I used on you, but we’re out now. Your steps must have increased more than I suspected, because you’re healing nicely.”

Sloane just nodded again. She didn’t want to give away anything that could be used against her and Sloane was not in a position where she could reasonably fight against Ressa. The woman was no slouch in the magic or even fighting department, despite the outcome of Marketbol.

Ressa frowned. “And, the ‘Union’ is what we call the Union of Sovereign Cities ever since they unified after the ceasefire. They don’t like that since they’d prefer to still be called the Sovereigns or whatever the Sovereignty is.” She rolled her eyes. “They’re so stuck up. Now, please excuse me before this burns.”

Ressa must have hunted while Sloane was sleeping.

She would rather have anyone else than Ressa, but she couldn’t deny feeling a bit of gratitude and... obligation for the woman. Her focus remained razor-sharp on survival and reconnection with her loved ones. Yet, as Ressa turned back to the fire and tended to their meager meal, Sloane couldn’t help but feel a grudging respect for the orkun woman. Despite their past enmity, Ressa had shown compassion and skill in saving her life, traits that Sloane couldn’t overlook.

She sighed and went to rub her head, only for her stump to move awkwardly.

It was at that moment that everything caught back up with her. Sloane cried.

Thankfully, Ressa let her be.

The meal they shared was simple and unsatisfying, but it provided the necessary sustenance to keep them going. Sloane’s injuries were a constant reminder of her vulnerability, the phantom sensations from her missing arm an unceasing torment. Ressa’s care, though unexpected, was a lifeline in the chaos that had become Sloane’s reality.

Manabound - Crucible

Ressa had helped clean her wounds and changed her bandages with fabric she conjured magically. Sloane was jealous of that ability. She also realized she had more wounds than just her arm. Like a large gash in her side that Ressa had stitched. Her entire abdomen was wrapped, and Ressa pointed out the ribs that were likely broken. The woman was—almost disturbingly—kind and gentle with her and Sloane couldn't help but be wary.

The subsequent hours passed in a blur of pain and restless sleep. At least until the next morning when Ressa's words echoed in Sloane's ears as they prepared to set out. "It's time to go, Reinhart," the woman had whispered, a somber note in her voice that mirrored the pre-dawn chill.

Assisted to her feet by Ressa, Sloane tested her strength, finding a stubborn resilience within herself. The prospect of a long journey on foot was daunting, yet Sloane knew it was their only option. As they ventured forth into the dim light of early morning, Sloane clung to the hope that they would find signs of civilization, that they would not be alone in this vast wilderness.

"Can you walk?" Ressa asked.

Sloane tried taking a few steps, then nodded. She felt like a bobble head. Speaking was tough. It was all she could do to keep her emotions in check, and speaking them aloud felt... overwhelming. This wasn't the time to get stuck on that. She needed safety. She needed Mariel and Nemura and Stefan. Even Nell and the other paladins.

Alyce. Oh gods, she was on the deck with me. What happened to her?

She turned her head to Ressa. "Did you see what happened to Alyce before the crash?"

Ressa looked up as she considered the question. "She... she was using the weapon you gave her. But then I lost sight of her when you were knocked unconscious after saving me."

Sloane tilted her head as they continued walking. "Wait, the sun elf woman? That was you?"

"My illusion, yes."

That... made a lot of sense to Sloane. She'd wondered how Ressa had gotten onto the ship, and now she knew. Her magic had improved significantly since she'd last seen—and fought her. It was something to watch out for.

Her lack of a reply must have given Ressa the impression that that particular line of questioning was done, because the woman switched topics. "Depending on where exactly we are, we're looking at... a very long walk. It's probably going to take several weeks. Keep a look out for literally any sign of others or habitation. We could use any help we can get. If we don't find anything in the forest, we may hit a village or hamlet before we reach Auvergne. Even a homestead would be nice."

"Fine."

Ressa ground her teeth. "Look—"

“Where are my belongings? I had my satchel and my Excerpt Reader on me.”

“I have your satchel in my pack. The runic device is in there. Damaged.”

“Those belong to me.”

Sloane almost laughed when the orkun clenched her fists. “I am aware. I will give them to you. I did not *steal* from you.”

Sloane watched the woman keep her gaze pointed straight ahead of them. She allowed herself a smirk.

“It only works for me.”

The Vlaredian woman turned her head toward Sloane. “What are you talking about?”

“You tried to use the reader, didn't you? I made them so they could only be used by one person. Less likely to be stolen or copied that way.”

When no response was forthcoming, Sloane raised a brow.

Ressa sighed. “Fine. Yes, of course I tried.”

Sloane nodded once. “If I fix it, you can use it. But I want to see.”

“I am not an idiot. That won't happen.” She paused. “I'm putting a lot of trust in you, Reinhart. Don't make me regret it.”

“You saved my life, I owe you,” Sloane replied, her voice tinged with sincerity. “I won't do anything if you don't. I do expect a conversation about how you found yourself on the *Wanderlust*. Do not lie.”

Ressa dipped her head. “That's acceptable. But we're not friends, Reinhart. I'm not here to coddle you. I need you to heal so you can pull your own weight. We need each other.”

Sloane shrugged. “That wasn't even on my mind.”

“Good.”

Good. Can't wait until we find Nemura, that's going to be a fantastic reunion.



The chill of the early morning air bit into Mariel's skin as she opened her eyes, the weight of the previous day pressing heavily on her heart. She glanced over at Ser Boney with Tiberius on his shoulder, the two guardians who had become her constant companions in this foreign wilderness. Their vigilance provided a small measure of comfort in the uncertainty that shrouded their situation.

The campsite was a sparse affair, little more than a cleared space amid the dense underbrush of the forest. She observed as Nemura moved with practiced efficiency to pack their things, her actions betraying none of the weariness that Mariel felt deep in her bones. The older woman's resilience was both reassuring and daunting; it reminded Mariel of the strength she needed to muster to face the days ahead.

To find her mom.

Gryff, the skeletal gryphon, stood like a silent sentinel at the edge of camp. Mariel had never imagined commanding such a creature, but necessity had required her to push herself in the aftermath of the crash.

Nemura's senses were as sharp as always. "We should get going," the telv warrior said softly. "We need to keep heading east."

Mariel shook off her lethargy, and slipped out of her blanket. "Alright. I'm ready," she said, getting up to assist Nemura. Together, they dismantled the camp with swift, coordinated movements. She'd have to rely on Nemmy. Luckily, her mom's friend wouldn't do anything to make her feel like she was a burden.

But still. She would pull her weight. Her pride demanded it. And then they would find her mom. Together.

As they prepared to set out, Mariel cast a glance at the forest around them. The pre-dawn light filtered through the canopy, casting long shadows and painting the world in hues of gray and silver. It was a hauntingly beautiful scene, yet one that held an undercurrent of menace. There were monsters and beasts stalking within, and although it wasn't nearly as bad as it was when they'd traveled through Rosale, it still made travel difficult and slow.

The forest around them seemed to hold its breath as Mariel and Nemura journeyed through its verdant corridors. The sun filtered through the high canopy, casting dappled shadows on the forest floor, providing a surreal sense of peace that belied the danger lurking at every turn.

They walked that way until the sun reached its peak.

Nemura's voice broke the silence, low and steady, offering words of comfort to the young necromancer by her side. "We'll find them, Mariel. Your mother is strong, and so are you. We just need to keep moving, keep searching."

Mariel nodded, drawing strength from Nemura's conviction. "I know. It's just hard, not knowing." Her eyes scanned the surrounding foliage, every rustle of leaves sending a jolt of alertness through her.

They progressed through the day, their pace measured and cautious. The ambient sounds of the forest—bird calls, the rustling of leaves, the occasional distant roar—provided a constant backdrop to their trek. When they came upon a clear, burbling stream, the relief was palpable. Nemura knelt, refilling their water skins, while Mariel watched the surroundings. While she waited, she summoned her [**Bone Spear**] to her hand and kept a lookout. Just in case.

Taking a short rest, Nemura produced some dried fruits and nuts from her spatial storage, offering some to Mariel. She set the spear down gently next to herself as she munched on the snack. They ate in silence, not because of any fear of what could be around them, but Mar had found herself with zero desire to have meaningless conversation. Not when her mother was out there. Possibly even hurt.

Please be alright, mom.

As they moved, Mariel reflected on the events that had brought them to this moment. The crash, the loss, the uncertainty—all of it seemed to converge into a singular point of focus: survival and the desperate search for their loved ones.

As the day waned, the forest's ambiance shifted, the sounds of daytime creatures giving way to a nocturnal chorus. Mariel felt a growing sense of unease, the weight of the day's journey settling upon her shoulders.

“We need to find a place to camp,” Nemura said.

Mariel nodded.

They walked a bit longer when Nemura threw a fist up. Mariel knew what to do. She drew mana through her core and sent a nudge to Ser Boney and Gryff. Tiberius silently took off, soaring through the gaps in the treetops and into the blue spring sky.

Then, amidst the natural symphony of the forest, a distinct sound pierced the air—a snap-hiss that was unmistakably the discharge of an [**Arcane Lance**]. Mariel and Nemura exchanged a quick, knowing look. That sound could only mean one thing.

Vesper.

For a moment, they stood frozen, listening as the echo of the arcane discharge faded into the forest's murmur. The two of them shared a look. With a silent nod, Nemura gestured for Mariel to follow, and together they moved toward the source of the sound. Nemura took the lead with Ser Boney at her side, the skeleton armed with a small buckler and a warhammer.

As they neared the location of the discharge, the cacophony of battle grew louder. Nemura signaled for caution, her eyes scanning the surroundings with practiced vigilance.

The clearing ahead was a scene of chaos. Alyce stood next to Vesper, the latter's [**Arcane Lances**] firing in rapid succession. Around them, the feline monsters snarled and leapt, their spiked tails a blur of motion. Alyce's caster was a steady pulse of runic [**Mana Bolts**] in the forest, each shot carefully aimed and executed.

Without hesitation, Mariel and Nemura joined the fray. Ser Boney charged forward, his skeletal form surprisingly agile as he engaged one of the beasts. The sound of bone striking flesh echoed through the clearing as he battered the creature with relentless fury.

Mariel focused her mana through her core and cast [**Splinter**] at the closest beast, the spell releasing a barrage of sharp bone shards that cut through the air with deadly accuracy. The creatures hissed and recoiled, their brown hides punctured by the magical projectiles.

Gryff demonstrated its own prowess. The skeletal gryffon dove into the melee, its beak and talons a blur of motion as it attacked another monster, driving it back with ferocious determination.

Nemura, meanwhile, showed that she was a natural warrior. She moved with a grace and power that belied her size, her strength formidable. She slashed through one creature then immediately charged another before it could leap at Alyce. Grabbing its spiked tail, she spun and released, sending it flying. Then, as if to punctuate the moment, Vesper's [**Arcane Lance**] intercepted the creature mid-air, ending its threat.

As the last of the monsters fell, the forest seemed to exhale, the tension dissipating like mist on a chilly morning. Alyce turned to them, her expression one of profound relief mixed with exhaustion.

Mariel rushed over to her and threw her arms around the pink haired human. "Alyce! Thank Tenera. I am so glad to see you."

"Nemura, Mariel. Oh rust, am I happy to see you," she said, her voice tinged with emotion. She quickly scanned their group, her gaze lingering on the absence at Mariel's side. "Where's your mom?" she inquired, her tone gentle yet laden with concern.

Mariel pulled away from the woman, the weight of uncertainty pressing down on her. "Haven't found her yet," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

Alyce nodded, understanding flashing in her eyes. She placed a hand on Mar's shoulder and squeezed. "We'll find her" she affirmed, her voice firm with conviction. "Now, thank you, and sorry to rush, but can you come with me? I have an injured crewman and one of the paladins guarding him a little ways away."

That was good news. If Alyce had one of the paladins, maybe he knew more about where the others potentially were.

Nemura surveyed the aftermath of their skirmish. "We're right behind you."

Mariel gently patted Vesper. “Hey Ves. Thanks for keeping Alyce safe. Mom will be happy.”

The lazy cat let out a soft rumble and bumped into Mar. She then looked up just as Tiberius came swooping down with a screech to land on one of the feline golem’s appendages.

When they arrived, they found a small clearing where the group had set up a makeshift camp. A sun elf man lay propped against a tree, his face pale and his breathing labored. Standing vigil was one of the paladins, his armor stained with the telltale signs of recent fighting.

Tiberius took off again, flying through the trees. She watched Nemura focus down at her Excerpt Reader, likely looking through Tib’s eyes at their surroundings.

Alyce immediately went to the injured man, checking his wounds with a practiced eye. “He was caught in the ambush by those beasts. Vesper and I led them away,” she explained without looking up. “Took a nasty hit, but he’s strong. He’ll make it with proper care.”

Nemura looked up and stepped forward, offering her assistance. “Let me help,” she said, kneeling beside the injured man. “I have some healing salves in my pack that might ease his pain.”

The healing salves were a small ointment that Rosale had started making. They weren’t anywhere near as effective as the elixirs that her mom’s center in Marketbol made. Well, not that she knew. She only remembered how excited her mom had been when she’d learned that the alchemists employed there had made healing elixirs.

Alyce nodded her thanks, her focus shifting to Mariel. “And you, young baroness. How have you been holding up?”

Mariel forced a smile, watching the paladin join Nemura and speak quietly as they worked together to help the injured man. Mar pushed down the emotions that gnawed at her insides. “I’m fine,” she lied. “Just worried about my mom.”

Alyce reached out, rubbing up and down Mariel’s arm reassuringly. “We’ll find her, Mariel. We’re all in this together, and we’ll make it through.”

The moment was interrupted by a rustle in the branches above them, and all eyes turned toward the sound. For a second, Mariel’s heart leapt. But it was just Tiberius, returning from his aerial reconnaissance.

The little construct landed on Mariel’s shoulder, chirping softly. She stroked his metal frame, taking comfort in his presence.

Eventually, the injured man was doing better, and speaking. Not that Mariel had time to focus on that. She had too much on her mind. She did hear Nemura talking to the paladin about his comrades. The man had been separated in the initial confrontation after following Nell’s orders to

protect Alyce. The human woman had explained how Vesper had been the reason she'd survived the crash at all.

The talking went on quietly until the sun went down and Mariel found herself yawning. Exhausted from the day and the fighting. A glance at her Excerpt Reader showed a notification for another step. She didn't even bother to check it yet. She would when she hit step sixty-four.

"We should get some rest," Nemura suggested, looking around the small camp. "We'll need all our strength for tomorrow. We have a long journey ahead, and who knows what else this island has in store for us."

As they settled down for the night, Mariel couldn't shake the feeling of unease that settled over her. The sound of Vesper's [**Arcane Lance**] had brought them here, had reunited them with Alyce and at least one of the paladins, but Stefan and Nell were still missing. Not to mention the other four paladins.

Then there was her mom. Potentially all alone.

And until they found her, Mariel knew she wouldn't be able to rest easy.