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## Roadside Assistance

The first hint that Sloane was back to the waking world was feeling a cool, damp cloth gently wiping at her face.

As the cloth pulled away, Sloane blinked her eyes slowly, and looked up at Nemura who was looking away from her and wringing the cloth into a bowl.

When Nemura turned back, her movements halted abruptly, her eyes widening slightly upon seeing Sloane awake. A faint smile tugged at Sloane's lips as she gazed up at her friend. Nemura, usually a bastion of strength and composure, appeared visibly weary. Dark circles underlined her eyes, and her normally lustrous hair was pulled back into a practical, albeit somewhat disheveled, ponytail. The signs of fatigue were evident, speaking volumes of her concern and dedication.

"Sloane..." Nemura exhaled, relief and weariness intermingling in her voice.

"Hey, Nemmy," Sloane greeted, her voice a soft murmur. "Seems I'm back from my little nap. Tell me, Mar didn't try to raise me from the dead or anything while I was gone, did she?"

A snort escaped Nemura, briefly illuminating her tired features with a flicker of amusement. She set the bowl aside, her gaze returning to Sloane with a mix of concern and relief. "It was longer than we anticipated, but Bones took it well," she confessed, her brows knitting together. "How are you feeling? We need to get some food in you."

Right on cue, Sloane's stomach grumbled loudly, its protest echoing in the quiet room. She winced slightly at the sound. "I'm *starving*. How long have I been out?"

"A week. Mariel stepped out to grab something to eat; she should be back shortly."

*A week? Holy shit.*

"Thank you," she said sincerely. "For everything."

Nemura's response was a smirk touched with warmth. "Did you expect any less from me?" she teased lightly.

Sloane's smile grew, tinged with a mixture of gratitude and amusement. "Well, you've certainly seen me at my worst now. I can only imagine..." She paused, shuddering at the thought of what Nemura had to go through for an entire week. "Thank you, truly."

Nemura gave a small nod in acknowledgment, her expression softening. "Mm. Now, let's get you sitting up," she suggested, offering a supporting hand.

With Nemura's assistance, Sloane shifted into a sitting position. The woman then poured a cup of water and handed it to her, cautioning, "Drink slowly." Sloane accepted the cup with a nod, her hands steady as she brought the life-giving liquid to her lips.

As Sloane sipped the water, Nemura began recounting the events that had transpired during her week-long absence. "It's been chaotic," Nemura started, her voice tinged with the weariness of relentless vigilance. "We've had to fend off two monster attacks. Thankfully, the promised reinforcements arrived this morning. There's a terran with them, too. But she's an ass, so... just warning you. She heard that you were here and was quite insistent on meeting you."

"That sounds irritating. She heard that I specifically was here?"

"No, just that a terran had helped stop the first wave and has been held up sick. The villagers were worried about you. Stefan took care of it though, and Nell refused to let that woman anywhere near you."

"Sounds good. When can we leave?"

"With you awake now, we should be able to leave as soon as you're ready."

Sloane nodded thoughtfully. "I should be good to go by tomorrow morning."

Nemura shook her head, a look of concern etching her features. "You've been immobile for a whole week, Sloane. We need to give it a few more days at least. Plus, there's more. Nell scouted the road ahead, and the situation is... complicated."

Sloane's brow furrowed. "What happened?"

"The first village on our path has been completely overrun by monsters. They've turned it into something like a nest," Nemura explained, her voice grave. "We need you at full strength, and even then it's going to be a challenging journey. It might take weeks to clear the way. We should consider whether it's wiser to turn back and take a longer, safer route."

"But I told Gwyn we were heading towards Calling," Sloane interjected, a hint of worry in her voice.

Nemura was about to respond when the door swung open. Mariel strode in, her arms laden with snacks and extra water, her face bright with optimism. "Hey, Nemmy. I've got some treats here, and more water for Mom. I brought extra food, just in case she wakes up today. I have a good feeling about it."

Nemura let out a soft chuckle as Mariel, completely unaware of Sloane's awakened state, moved past them to arrange the tray on the table. "Any news? Need me to take over for a bit? I think I want to braid her hair. She likes it when I do that."

“No, I think we’re all set for now, Bones,” Nemura replied, her chuckle turning into a full laugh. She shot a playful wink at Sloane, who could only respond with an eye roll.

“Why not? You’re not trying to keep her all to yourself, are you? I know you love her, but remember, she’s *my* mom,” Mariel teased, her back still turned.

At that, Nemura nearly choked on her own spit, coughing and sputtering.

Sloane couldn’t help but giggle at the scene unfolding before her.

Mariel slowly turned around, her eyes widening in shock and joy. “M-Mom?”

“Hey, sweetie,” Sloane greeted, her voice warm and filled with affection. “I’d love for you to braid my hair.”

Mariel, unable to contain her relief and joy, rushed forward and enveloped Sloane in a tight hug. Sloane winced slightly under the intensity of the embrace, but her expression softened, filled with love and gratitude for her daughter.

Nemura quickly interjected, “Easy there, Bones. Your mother is still weak. She needs to take it easy for a while.”

Sloane waved her off with a gentle smile. “I’m never too weak to hold my daughter,” she said softly, her arms wrapping more firmly around Mariel in a comforting embrace.

Mariel buried her face in Sloane’s shoulder, her body shaking with suppressed emotions. “I missed you so much,” she sniffled. “Nemmy and I... we took care of you. We took turns keeping watch, making sure you were safe.”

Sloane felt a swell of emotion at her daughter’s words, her heart full of appreciation for the care and concern shown by her family in this world. She gently ruffled Mariel’s hair, a small gesture of maternal affection. “And thank you so much, sweetie. You and Nemmy have been my guardians. I don’t know what I’d do without you both.”

“What happened, Mom? Why’d it take so long?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure, but have I got a story for you both. Nemmy? Have a seat.”

Nemura sat down on the edge of the bed and looked down at them as Mariel nestled in beside Sloane. The only thing that would make the scene better was if Gwyn was there.

“So, I talked to your sister...”

That conversation took the rest of the night, and Sloane couldn’t help but feel a bit better about everything.

Sloane smiled as her daughter snuggled close when it was finally time to sleep.

“Mom?”

“Yeah, sweetie?”

“You have to teach me Italian. I have to get this right when I meet my sister.”

Sloane squeezed her tight. “I’d love to.”

*You’re gonna love your sister, Gwyn. She’s so excited to meet you.*



It only took a week for Sloane to convince Nemura she felt fine enough to leave. The morning of their departure, Sloane descended the inn’s creaky staircase with Mariel clinging to her like a second shadow, holding on for dear life like a cute little death-loving growth. Mar could tell how excited her mother was, and had glomped onto her. The buzz of leaving filled Sloane with an invigorating sense of purpose. The inn, bustling with patrons and the muffled sounds of conversation, felt like a cramped cocoon they were finally ready to shed.

Navigating through the lively common room, Sloane and her ever-curious raithe appendage reached the front counter. The innkeeper, a robust woman with a practiced smile, attended to them promptly, offering a modest discount in light of the paladins’ recent heroics. Sloane accepted the gesture with a mix of gratitude and mild annoyance; still a bit irritated that she had to pay for the paladins.

She wasn’t even part of their religion! Money grubbers, the lot of them.

When their business with the inn was concluded, Sloane took Mariel’s hand, feeling the smaller, warm grip in hers, and led her toward the bright light of the entrance.

“Mom?” Mariel’s voice broke through her thoughts as they stepped into the fresh air.

“What’s up?”

“So, let me get this right. Gwyn’s my *little* sister... but she’s about as tall as Stefan.”

Sloane couldn’t help but chuckle softly, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “Yes, she is. Surprised me too.”

Mariel’s fascination with Gwyn had become a constant theme over the past week, a delightful barrage of questions that Sloane found endearing. She’d even started giving basic Italian lessons to her, which Mar took up with great enthusiasm.

“She’s going to be a tall one! How close to your height is she?” The familiar voice came from behind them.

Turning, Sloane and Mariel were greeted by a giantess, her smile as wide as the sky. The tall woman's presence was like a comforting mountain, steadfast and immovable.

"She comes to about my forehead, I think. We didn't really get time to measure each other up, Nemura," Sloane replied, her tone playful yet tinged with a hint of sadness at the brevity of their meeting.

"At thirteen? She'll be towering before we know it. I'll have to teach her how to fight like a proper warrior woman once she's grown," Nemura mused, her eyes twinkling with excitement.

"You will do no such thing."

"Why not? A girl should know how to defend herself," Nemura countered, her stance firm yet gentle.

"My daughter clearly knows something on that subject if her magic was anything to go by."

"What about Mariel, then?" Nemura turned her attention to the younger girl next to Sloane.

"What about her?" Sloane echoed, raising an eyebrow.

"Can I teach her to fight?"

Mariel's eyes lit up, a spark of excitement flaring within them. "Mom? Can she? She can help me learn how to use my **[Bone Spear]**. Working with Ser Boney only helps so much."

"Exactly, Slo. Ser Boney isn't even that good. I've been working with him, but I think his head is a bit empty. I can help her and you know it."

Sloane still couldn't help but groan at Mar's choice of a name for the skeletal orkun warrior she raised. But, that wouldn't budge her. She had her reasons, and like any proper mother, she just had to patiently explain to the two children why they weren't getting their way.

Starting with the tall one.

She turned and wagged a finger at the taller woman. "Nuh uh, don't try and distract me by using my daughter against me, Nemmy. They can't fight like you do."

Nemura's expression faltered, a hint of frustration flickering in her eyes. "Why not? They're more than capable, Sloane. I know you're their mother, but this isn't about—"

Mariel's voice, tinged with confusion, interjected. "Why can't I learn from her?"

Sloane turned to her daughter, her voice firm yet gentle. "Because you're a mage, Mariel. Nemura's teachings were invaluable before all of this mess, but now she's been changed as much as we have, but for her it's *physically*. A mage cannot compete with high level physical users in close combat through might alone. You *have* to fight differently. You must learn to fight in a way that leverages your own strengths."

Addressing Nemura, Sloane continued before the telv woman could protest. “It’s not that I don’t *want* you to train my daughters, Nemura. You know I trust you more than anything. I trust you with my daughters’ life as much as my own. It’s just... you can’t teach them to fight like *you*. It’s no longer possible. Instead, what I’d like for you to do, *if you are willing*, is teach them how to fight *against* someone like you with their own magical capabilities.”

Nemura’s features softened. “That... makes sense.” She stepped forward, enveloping Sloane in a warm, unexpected hug. “Thank you, Sloane. This means more to me than you know. I apologize for getting carried away. I should have known that you...” She shook her head. “I will teach them well, Slo. I swear this. They will be well-prepared to face someone like me.”

Pulling back, Sloane’s expression turned thoughtful. “Just so you know, Gwyn’s probably already getting combat training from paladins according to Nell.”

It was something Nell had mentioned to Sloane one night when they were talking about the paladins that were apparently assigned to Gwyn and what their duties would be. Everything she heard had made her feel better. They were there solely to protect her against literally anything.

That was valuable, and made Sloane feel a bit better about the Church in general.

Nemura scoffed lightly, a spark of competitive spirit in her eyes. “Then she’ll have a hopefully decent foundation when we find her. May need a bit of polishing though.”

Sloane teased, “Why don’t you share your thoughts about their skills with the paladins we’re traveling with, then? Hmm?”

“Maybe, I will. Can’t have you thinking that I’ll be shown up by them.” Nemura retorted, her pride evident.

“I would *never* think the almighty Nemura—”

“*Moms*, speaking of paladins... ours are coming,” Mariel sniped.

Sloane nudged Mariel playfully. “Really now?”

Mariel squirmed away, rubbing her side with a mock glare. “You two bicker like an old couple. It’s fitting.”

Sloane couldn’t help but scowl at Nemura’s shit eating grin. “Don’t you get ideas you oversized oaf.”

“I would *never* think that the great Baroness Reinhart would entangle herself with a mere peasant *flower* like me.”

“More like a persistent weed,” Sloane muttered, turning her attention to Evocati Nell, who was approaching them.

“I heard that,” Nemura whispered, still amused.

“Good,” Sloane hissed.

“You’re adorable when you’re flustered,” Nemura teased.

Ignoring the annoying woman behind her, Sloane put on a welcoming smile and greeted their approaching companion. “Nell! How are things? Are we all set to head out?”

“We are. Stefan has the constructs with him. He’s having another delightful conversation with the terran. She’s *very* upset that she’s not allowed to see you.”

*Constructs.* It’s what the paladins were lumping Vesper, Tiberius, and... Ser... Boney into. It helped them with the whole raising the dead thing. Sloane could tell a few of the younger paladins weren’t happy, but Nell had made peace with it. Especially when Mariel had accidentally let it slip that she had been a priestess-in-training.

That had been a bit more uncomfortable, but Nell had been surprisingly pragmatic. She also had a job that *didn’t* include taking Mariel to some secluded temple. She simply told Sloane one night that it was clear of the bond Sloane and Mariel shared, and that she would testify on their behalf when they reached Calling.

Nell was alright in her book after that.

Maybe not alright enough to pay for every inn, but it was a small sacrifice for another ally to help her daughter have a true home.

“I can imagine. But I really suppose I must say something. Although, if she’s as snooty as you all say, I may need you to step in.”

The sun elf woman’s smirk was a bit concerning.

“I know you’re wanting to be incognito a bit for some reason, but don’t you worry. Pissing off nobles is a paladin’s favorite pastime.”

Sloane nodded, her mind already formulating how to handle the upcoming encounter. Turning to Nemura and Mariel, she instructed, “Meet me at the wagon, will you? I’ll go with Nell to speak with Stefan and the village’s esteemed guest.”

Mariel nodded, a mix of excitement and curiosity in her eyes. Nemura simply gave an affirmative grunt, her expression unreadable but supportive.

As Sloane and Nell began their walk towards the village center, Nell gestured in the direction of a distinguished-looking building. “The terran lady has made herself quite comfortable at the village head’s house. Seems she’s used to certain standards.”

## Manabound - Resilience

Sloane's gaze followed Nell's gesture, taking in the well-maintained structure that stood out among the village's more modest dwellings. She let out a soft sigh, bracing herself for the encounter. Diplomacy was not her favorite arena, but it was necessary.

“Or she’s used to them *now*. She could have been a waitress back on Earth for all we know. Not that it’s a bad thing. Just pointing out that us humans can take advantage of that anonymity.”

Nell glanced at her questioningly. “Did you?”

“Of course I did. I’ve been trying to find my daughter. It’s an advantage that I’ve used.”

The paladin seemed surprised at Sloane’s blunt honesty. “So you weren’t a noble?”

“Nope. I never claimed to be one. Although, I *was* granted my peerage here through normal procedure, not through false pretenses.”

“Normal procedure?”

“Nepotism between friends of course.”

Nell laughed loudly. “Sounds about right. Oh, that’s good. You’re an alright noble, Sloane.”

“You’re not too bad yourself, paladin.”

As Sloane and Nell approached the scene, the shrill timbre of an argument pierced the air.

Sloane's eyes first landed on Mar's skeletal warrior, its frame adorned with mismatched scale mail armor. The sight of its weapons sheathed at its waist and a well-worn round shield affixed to its back sparked a thought in Sloane's mind.

*I wonder how it would fare using a caster...*

Although the thought of an undead army wielding guns... She shivered.

*At least it would be Mariel controlling them.*

Next to the skeletal figure loomed Vesper's massive form, an imposing presence that clearly unsettled the cluster of men-at-arms facing it. The soldiers shifted uncomfortably, their eyes darting between the construct and the noble they were presumably defending. It was evident they were caught between duty and the instinctive desire to flee.

Then there was Stefan.

His expression was one of forced calm and diplomacy, a mask that poorly veiled his underlying frustration. It was a facade Sloane had seen before—Stefan's diplomatic face, which he donned when he was internally seething yet needed to present a front of civility. Sloane silently admired his skill at this delicate balancing act, acknowledging it as something she needed to master herself.

She would have mouthed off by now.



As she stepped closer, the details of the argument became clearer. The high-pitched voice belonged to a woman, presumably the terran noble, her tone laced with indignation and authority. She was gesturing emphatically towards the constructs, her words sharp and accusatory.

Stefan, maintaining his composure, was responding with measured words, his tone soothing yet firm. Vesper and the skeletal warrior stood motionless, their presence alone a statement of defiance against the noble's demands.

Sloane wasn't sure where Tiberius was, but she was sure he was flying around somewhere keeping watch.

Sloane took a deep breath, steeling herself for the encounter. She exchanged a quick glance with Nell, who gave a subtle nod, indicating her readiness to intervene if necessary.

"Let's see what this is all about," Sloane muttered, stepping forward to join Stefan.

As Sloane made her way to the forefront, the terran noble's sharp gaze shifted from Stefan to her. The woman, in her mid to late twenties, had a... *presence*, despite her youth. Her appearance was meticulously groomed, with styled dark brown hair that framed her tanned face in elegant waves, and her attire was of fine quality, blending practicality with a touch of refinement that was common amongst the nobility she'd seen in the country. Her posture exuded confidence, and her accent, distinctly American, added an unfamiliar flavor to her speech in this diverse world

The woman's expression morphed into a scowl as she addressed Stefan, then quickly turned her brown eyes to Sloane. "Finally, I have been trying to see you ever since we arrived. Are you being held against your will, miss... Rossi, was it?"

Stefan, clearly agitated, opened his mouth as if to retort, but Sloane smoothly stepped up beside him, placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "I got this," she murmured to him with a calm authority. "Why don't you take Vesper and Mariel's friend to the wagon? I have Nell with me."

Stefan hesitated for a moment, his eyes darting between Sloane and the terran woman, then nodded. "Alright, Sloane. If you need anything, just call." He then gestured to Vesper and the skeletal warrior, leading them away from the confrontation.

The woman watched Stefan and the constructs leave, then refocused her attention on Sloane, her eyes narrowing slightly. "So, Miss Rossi, I assume you can speak for yourself. Are these... people... treating you well? I simply wished to ensure you were safe and not being taken advantage of. So many of our people have been. I have made it my purpose to find others to ensure they have a safe haven. I can give you an escort to a place where your abilities will not be just a tool for people to abuse. I swear that—"

Sloane took a measured breath, preparing to navigate the conversation with this assertive and seemingly misinformed noble. Nell, standing a respectful distance away, remained alert and ready to assist if needed.

“Who even are you? You’ve said all of this, but you didn’t even introduce yourself.”

The woman jerked back with a frown at the interruption.

“My apologies. I am Lady Stephanie Clarke. I established a noble House in Dayton where you can pursue whatever you desire in this world we’ve found ourselves in. I can only imagine the shock it must be to be away from Earth. You sound American, as well, so I can imagine the lack of luxuries that you may be used to is a struggle. I’ve regained a semblance of what I’m used to, and I hear there are exciting businesses creating magical items that can accomplish common tasks. I just learned about one new venture in Nornport actually. Look, I realize that you are about to leave, but you can be so much more if you come with me. You don’t have to go from place to place at the whims of others, waiting to be used by the established people here. Let me help you and I—”

*Damn it, should have opened up with Italian. But at least she’s heard of the Center. That’ll be good for business. I’ll need to send a letter to Aila though, to ensure the terrans in Dayton don’t become too large of competitors.*

Sloane shrugged. “Listen, I’m sure your deal is great, and I’m sure you really believe in it. I truly wish you the best in what you have going, but I’m not interested.”

Lady Clarke paused, seemingly taken aback by Sloane’s directness. She composed herself, her demeanor shifting from concerned to persuasive. “I understand your hesitation, Miss Rossi. It’s not easy to trust in these turbulent times. But please consider the opportunity I’m offering. In Dayton, under my protection, you could truly flourish without the constraints you face here. You won’t just be another wanderer; you’ll have a place, a purpose. And as an American, I’m sure you appreciate the value of independence and self-determination. This is a chance to reclaim some semblance of the life you knew, to use your skills for your own benefit, not just as a tool for others.”

*Holy shit, woman. Talk much? Let’s try a different tack.*

“Look, I’m not even American. I’m from Italy. Seriously, I have other shit going on. I appreciate the concern, but we’re leaving. Good luck.”

Lady Stephanie Clarke’s expression shifted subtly, a hint of displeasure creeping into her features as Sloane declined her offer. The noblewoman straightened her posture, her eyes narrowing with a determination that suggested she was not accustomed to being refused.

Sloane made to turn, but the woman quickly stepped forward and reached out to grab Sloane’s arm. The Arcane Battlesmith tensed up, and instinctively drew mana into herself.

Luckily, the woman hesitated before touching Sloane.

“I must insist, Miss Rossi,” Stephanie began, her tone taking on a sharper edge. “You may not realize the opportunity you’re passing up. In Dayton, under my guidance, you could achieve great things. You have potential that shouldn’t be wasted wandering aimlessly. It’s clear you’re capable, but without proper direction and support, you’ll find yourself limited in what you can achieve.”

Sloane maintained a polite, yet firm demeanor but inside she was starting to seethe. “I appreciate your concern, Lady Clarke,” she bit out, “but my path is already set. I have obligations and goals that do not align with yours. Your offer is generous, but it’s not for me.”

Stephanie’s frown deepened, and she took a step closer. “You’re making a mistake. I can offer you protection, resources, connections... Things that are invaluable in a world like this. Think about it. You don’t have to make your decision right now. I’ll be in the village for a few more days. We could—”

Sloane interrupted her with a shake of her head. “*Again*, thank you for your offer, but I must decline. I really must be going now. Daylight is wasting.”

For a moment, it seemed as though Stephanie might protest further, but she closed her mouth and took a step back, her expression hardening. “Very well, Miss Rossi. Should you change your mind, you know where to find me. Dayton could use someone of your caliber.”

With those final words, Stephanie turned on her heel and strode away, her posture rigid with barely concealed frustration. Sloane watched her go for a moment, then turned to Nell with a slight shrug.

Sloane exchanged a knowing look with Nell. “Well, that was... interesting.”

The Sun Elf’s eyes sparkled with a mix of amusement and curiosity as they walked side by side towards the waiting wagon. “It was. She seemed quite desperate.”

“Yeah, she did, didn’t she? Strange.”

Nell glanced at Sloane, her expression turning slightly more serious. “You weren’t entirely honest with her, though. About your origins, I mean.”

“Ah,” Sloane sighed. “Yeah. It’s complicated, but the gist of it is, I left that country years ago.”

The Sun Elf paladin nodded understandingly, her expression softening. “We all have pasts we’ve moved beyond. I, too, have left behind much to pursue my current path. Still, none of that compares to what you are having to experience now. I do not envy you in this.”

Sloane’s eyes flickered with a mix of sadness and resolve. “Everything will be better when I get to Gwyn. I do miss what we left, but being here has also brought unexpected blessings. Friends who I count among the closest I’ve ever had and a daughter I would never have known. Dwelling in regret only anchors us to what was, preventing us from fully embracing what is.”

Nell smiled at her words. “Wisely said, Sloane.”

Sloane gave a half-smile, her gaze fixed ahead. “Every now and then I surprise even myself.”

The sun elf’s soft snort was her only response.

Reaching the wagon, they found it bustling with readiness. Another paladin handed Nell her horse’s reins, and with an agile leap, she mounted, ready to lead the way. Sloane climbed up beside Nemura on the wagon bench, her eyes twinkling with anticipation. “Let’s roll out.”

“Are we all set, Mom?” Mariel’s voice floated from the back of the wagon, tinged with a mixture of excitement and concern. Sloane glanced back to see her daughter carefully adjusting the skeletal warrior’s armor, her movements tender and meticulous as if playing with a doll.

“Yes, sweetheart, we’re going.”

The wagon lurched into motion, and almost immediately, Stefan’s voice rose above the general hubbub. “By the gods, Vesper, get your tail out of my face!”

Sloane and Nemura exchanged a quick look, their shared laughter ringing out as the wagon rumbled forward, the journey to their next destination underway.

Just before they left the village, Sloane looked back, seeing the terran woman standing there with her men watching them depart.

*Strange woman.*



The journey along the Heartwood Road was proving to be an odyssey marked by trials and tribulations. The first village they encountered was... it was bad. It had transformed into a nest of monstrosities, a twisted labyrinth of horror and despair. The group had methodically cleared the area, moving with a mix of precision and grim determination. Yet, amidst the ruins and desolation, there was no hope to find survivors, not that any of them really expected such a thing.

Buildings that had once offered sanctuary were now mere shells, unable to shield their inhabitants from the smaller, more insidious creatures that lurked in the shadows.

It took weeks, and that was after they’d built a veritable fortress of a campsite using Sloane and Mariel’s magic combined with pure paladin enhanced stubbornness chased with a dash of giantess dick measuring.

That had become their new *modus operandi*. Build a fortified place to rest and retreat to if needed, and clear forward until they needed to build another.

Sloane expected future travelers would appreciate what they left behind.

The next challenge they ran into was a village overrun by insectile monsters. The process of clearing it was harrowing, etching images into Sloane's mind that would linger longer than she'd care to admit in her dreams.

Weeks passed in a relentless blur of confrontation and movement, each day blending into the next as they pushed onward. They were now more than halfway through their arduous journey on the Heartwood Road. Ahead lay what was once known to be the densest concentration of the monster swarm, a daunting prospect even for their now seasoned monster-slaying group. Another village loomed at the threshold of the pass, a final barrier before they could emerge from this gauntlet.

Compounding their challenges, Tiberius had been relegated to flying closer to the group. A recent skirmish with flying monsters when he had tried to fly east past Heartwoods had nearly ended in disaster, with the brave little golem that could barely making it back to safety.

Nell expected them to catch sight of soldiers soon, as she knew the army was attempting to push through from the opposite side while Dayton's forces were slowly coming from behind.

*Likely going to take credit for the work we've done.*

It was nearing midday when the caravan trudged along the rugged path, the sun high and unrelenting, and she knew they would stop soon to build their next camp. Nemura, her eyes scanning the road ahead, suddenly stiffened as her gaze moved to the excerpt reader attached to her bracer.

"Tiberius has spotted something up ahead," she announced, her voice carrying an edge of urgency.

Reacting swiftly, Nell and another paladin spurred their horses forward, racing ahead to scout the situation. Not even ten minutes later, the evocati returned at a gallop, her voice cutting through the air.

"Armored carriage in distress! Wheel's off, and the guards are engaged in combat! We're aiding."

Without missing a beat, Sloane called out, "We'll catch up! Vesper, go help them!"

The massive golem, understanding the urgency, leapt from the back of the wagon with a thunderous rumble. The rest of the paladins surged forward, their mounts picking up speed as they raced towards the fray.

The wagon, now moving at a brisker pace, followed in the wake of the charging paladins. Sloane's eyes were fixed on the unfolding scene ahead, her mind racing with strategies and potential threats. Beside her, Nemura's fingers danced over the excerpt reader, gathering more information from Tiberius's vantage point.

“Looks like six bear-like monsters remain. There’s a second armored carriage overturned just ahead of the first one.”

With deft movements, Sloane reached down and grasped her caster. The familiar weight of the weapon in her hands brought a sense of readiness. She swiftly checked the cartridges, ensuring everything was in order for the impending confrontation. “Stefan, Mar, you two ready?” she called out.

Sloane could hear the clink and rattle of the bone armor, recalling the recent meticulous enchantments she had applied to Mariel’s stash of bones at their last camp. From behind, Mariel’s voice rang out, clear and confident. “Ready! Ser Boney is good to go!”

*He better be, after I enchanted all his armor.*

“Steffy?”

“When are you going to stop calling me that? I’m ready, woman,” Stefan’s suave voice replied.

Sloane couldn’t help but smile. “I’ll never stop now that I know you love it.”

“Sometimes I really hate you,” he grumbled, but there was an undertone of affection in his voice.

He was truly the younger brother she’d never had. It made picking on him even more fun.

As they readied themselves, Sloane raised her arm, activating her **[Shield Buckler]** from her watch. The shield materialized, shimmering with a protective glow. “Ah, but that means the rest of the time you love me. Thanks, Steffy. You’re a true friend,” she teased. “Mariel’s lucky to have you for an uncle.”

Nemura chuckled. “Blade, this is yours today. I’ll stay with the horses.”

“Understood, Fist.”

“She’s a *former* Fist,” Mariel helpfully chirped.

“She’s still got a fist, doesn’t she? I’m sure she knows how to use it,” Stefan quipped.

Sloane shot him a sharp look. “Do not say shit like that in front of my daughter.”

Stefan raised an eyebrow. “You let her fight monsters, but vulgarity is where you draw the line.”

“You’ve known this. Don’t get snippy now, mister,” she warned.

“What does it mean?” the sweet cherub of death inquired most unhelpfully.

Sloane’s swift “You’re too young” was overshadowed by Nemura’s teasing “I’ll tell you later.”

She turned her glare onto Nemura. “You will not.”

The telv was apparently unfazed by the mother, because she winked at Sloane’s innocent former priestess-in-training of a daughter. “I’ll tell you when you’re older.”

Mariel giggled.

“I swear I second guess my choice in companions every day. Literally the worst influences on my pure, innocent daughter,” Sloane lamented in mock despair.

“Mom, I raise the dead,” Mariel pointed out matter-of-factly.

“Yes sweetie, but just the bones, because anything else grosses you out,” Sloane reminded her.

“It’s disgusting!” Mariel shuddered. “Zombies are so gross. Why’d you tell me about those!?”

“Look alive, we’re here,” Nemura called out. “The meatheads are already... oh, look at that, they’re about done.”

Sloane turned her gaze towards the fray, observing Nell and the paladins as they dispatched the last of the monsters.

The wagon, now navigating through the aftermath of the battle, slowed beside the damaged carriages. These vehicles were more akin to steel fortresses on wheels than mere transports, their robust frames hinting at the importance of their passengers. Guards armed with halberds stood vigil around the carriages, their expressions a mix of relief and wariness as they scanned the surroundings for any lingering threats.

Near the carriages, two telv men in elaborate robes were engrossed in tending to the wounded. The injured, a mix of guards and perhaps passengers, were receiving much-needed care, their expressions easing as pain and fear were replaced with relief.

*Hub, healers. That’s helpful.*

Adding to the intrigue of the scene was the presence of a moon elf woman, also adorned in robes. She stood in conversation with Nell, their exchange appearing tense. The moon elf’s elegant posture and the fluidity of her gestures spoke of authority.

Sloane cast a reassuring glance at her companions as she prepared to leave the wagon. “Stay together, everyone. We don’t know what we’re walking into here. Let me figure it out and I’ll come get you.”

“I can send Ser Boney with you,” Mariel offered in a hushed tone, her concern evident in her eyes.

Sloane gently shook her head, appreciating her daughter’s protective instincts. “I’ll be fine, sweetie. Vesper’s over there, and so is Nell. They’ve got this under control,” she assured her, her voice carrying a confidence that she hoped would ease Mariel’s worries.

With one last look at her friends and her daughter, Sloane stepped down from the wagon, her footsteps deliberate and cautious as she made her way towards the scene. Each step brought her closer to the gathering, and the air seemed to hum with a mixture of tension and relief following the battle.

As she approached, her eyes scanned the area, taking in every detail—the weary yet alert expressions of the guards, the focused concentration of what she now assumed were priests, and the animated discussion between Nell and the moon elf. Sloane's presence, while unobtrusive, was marked by an aura of determination and curiosity.

As Sloane drew nearer, Nell's gaze shifted to meet hers. “Miss Rossi, glad you could join us. I see Ser Nemura is with the wagon and the rest?”

Sloane's instincts kicked in, sensing the unspoken cues in Nell's tone. *She's being cautious for a reason.* “Yes, Evocati, she's overseeing things there. Is everything under control here? We've got some extra supplies in the wagon if needed.”

Nell shook her head. “No, no. I think everything is fine here. Between my squad and your creation, we had everything well in hand.” Sloane noted the careful avoidance of Vesper's name.

*Playing it safe with the titles, understood.*

Her eyes briefly met those of the moon elf. The elf's robes, adorned with elaborate designs, spoke of her high rank. *A priestess, then. High-ranking, without a doubt.* Sloane was quietly relieved that the wagon's cover partly hid Mariel and Ser Boney.

“Everything's handled then? That's a relief,” Sloane responded, keeping her tone neutral.

“Indeed. Allow me to introduce High Priestess Zeriel Othiwen,” Nell gestured towards the moon elf.

Zeriel's smile was gentle, her silver eyes glinting with curiosity. She extended a lavender hand, which Sloane took and shook gently. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Rossi. I must say we were surprised to see such a large squad of Alos's Holy Order approach out of nowhere. We were most fortunate.”

Sloane offered a polite, if somewhat guarded, reply, “And it's my pleasure to meet you as well, High Priestess. I'm just happy that everyone that can be is safe.”

Nell gave Sloane a slight nod before taking over, “High Priestess, I don't wish to impose further. This is as good a place as any, so my squad and Ser Nemura's group will be building a fortified camp, so if you will excuse me—”

Zeriel's smile broadened. “A splendid idea. We'd be more than happy to collaborate. It will be good to rest in a secure location.”

“Yes, of course, High Priestess.”

With a courteous nod, Zeriel excused herself. “Miss Rossi, I hope to converse more with you this evening. Until then, duty calls.”

Sloane returned the gesture. “I look forward to it, High Priestess.”



Nell guided Sloane away and back toward the wagon. As they moved away, Sloane discreetly gestured to Nemura, who subtly relayed a message to Mariel and Stefan.

Mariel would know what that meant.

Sloane leaned closer to Nell, her voice a whisper. "What's your read on this?"

Nell's reply was low and cautious. "I'm wary. There's more here than meets the eye."

*Well shit, just what we needed.* Sloane thought, her mind racing with possibilities as they rejoined their group, preparing for the uncertainty of the evening ahead

"Let's not get all worn out building the camp then. She did offer to let her guards help. May as well put them to work. It'll be easier to keep an eye on them."

"I'll assign someone to stay close to Mariel at all times for extra precaution."

Sloane nodded. "Thank you. I'll make sure she knows no bones."

Nemura followed as the three joined the waiting Stefan and Mar at the back. Her daughter had already shed her **[Bone Armor]**, replaced by a simple tunic and pants. Sloane glanced behind her, satisfied at the sight of the piled armor and weapons instead of Ser Boney.

"What's the situation, Mom?" Mariel asked.

"First off, Mariel, no magic," Sloane reiterated. She turned to Stefan, her voice firm. "You're my husband again, and Mariel is our daughter."

Stefan exhaled resignedly. "Alright."

She fixed him with a serious gaze. "Keep your Blade close."

Understanding dawned in his red eyes. "Understood."

Nell chimed in, "Good. I will have someone stay with Mariel at all times. That woman is a High Priestess of Relena." Mariel sucked in a breath as Nell continued, "I am not sure what she's doing here, but I believe it is wise that we keep your magic under wraps, Mariel."

"Don't worry. I will," Sloane's daughter agreed.

Sloane looked at Nell, her eyes questioning. "Anything else?"

Nell's face was grave. "There's something else going on. She lied multiple times during our brief conversation. Seven times, to be exact."

Nemura frowned. "Even with what they have, they can't take us. What's the plan?"

Sloane shared a glance with Nell before answering, "She offered her guards to help set up camp. Let's put them to work without wearing ourselves out. Be wary, they *do* have two healers."

"And at least one clear offensive mage," Nell added.

“And we stay discreet about our capabilities until we figure out their intentions,” Sloane said, receiving a nod from everyone, if a hesitant one from the paladin. She directed the next bit to that woman, “Hopefully, it’s nothing malicious to anyone *here* at least. We can ignore a lot since we are just passing through.”

A timid voice interrupted their discussion. “Uhm... Mom?” Mariel looked up, her face troubled.

“Yes, sweetie?”

“What’s her name? The High Priestess?” Mariel asked.

Nell answered, “High Priestess Zariel Othiwen.”

Mariel’s frown deepened and she closed her eyes. Sloane heard her daughter’s sniffing. “I know what she’s doing here. At least I think...”

“What? How?” Sloane asked.

Her daughter took a deep breath and exhaled. “She’s... she’s the high priestess of the order I’m supposed to be going to.”