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## Seeing the Truth

*One of the last things discovered was how a person's domains were chosen. Many believed it was an act of the gods, but as we came to know later, that wasn't true for the vast majority.*

*This is attributed to the fact that domains are developed based on a child's view of the world and how they believe they can shape it. The age old Nurture versus Nature debate and how much it affects such development is still argued today.*

*Divination remains the least understood domain of all the schools of magic and in the early years, all uses that showed the future were seen as divine. That the majority of divination mages were members of the Church was not surprising.*

*A History of Mana. 184 SA*

Building the fortified camp took only most of the afternoon and into the evening, rather than the usual until it was dark out. Having the guards from the high priestess's group was certainly helpful. Especially since the guards were instantly friendly because of the paladins. Which even extended to Sloane's group of four.

Sloane's group had been working off of dried goods and hunting for weeks now, but luckily the other group had some stuff. Word from various guards was that they had tried to force their way through the monster lines after an attack from the army. They had been surprised that there was a clear way through the village, then were attacked almost immediately after.

They'd been engaged in a running fight ever since, which had whittled down their numbers. When the group had left, there were five armored wagons and carriages, now there were just the two damaged ones. That still left them with plenty of guards who had piled onto whatever horses still lived—even if bare back in one case—and on top of the carriages as they moved in case of the archers and crossbowmen.

Now that the sun was setting, watches had been set, and everyone was together inside the fortified camp. Which, really, was just a palisade with enough space inside for wagons, horses, and tents. The part that made it actually defensible was the enchants that Sloane had devised. Using the cores of the monsters and beasts they'd fought, she'd managed to **[Strengthen]** and **[Renew]** the entirety of the wall, along with some basic **[Shields]** that helped soak more damage. The enchants didn't use her now dwindling supply of enchanting ink, so the cores were especially required as there were an overabundance of them in order to keep powering the mana-hungry enchants that threatened to dissipate if they weren't constantly soaking up juice.

## Manabound - Resilience

Even still, their lifespan didn't measure that long.

Sloane placed her little tool chest into the back of the wagon and glanced over at the fire.

She was hungry and by now, everything should be ready.

After quickly making her way over to the cooking fire, she was served food by one of the Church priests, who she thanked for the stew they made before making her way to a spot between Mariel and Nell. She set her cup of water down next to herself and lay her bowl in her lap.

"Hey, Mom," Mariel said quietly.

Sloane smiled down at her daughter before breaking off a bit of bread and dipping it into the stew. "How are you, sweetheart?"

"I'm alright. Bored." Mariel yawned and leaned against Sloane. "No one's bothered me, though." She gestured absently behind them where Vesper was curled up. "I blame lazy cat."

To Sloane's right, Nell huffed. "Yeah, I think after watching your golem kill the few monsters that have tried to attack while building, the other party is keeping their distance. But your daughter has one thing right, these nights are always boring and tense. At least the first few nights. There will be attacks."

Sloane bit into her bread and nodded. "That's the way of it. We have to show we're the baddest bitches around before the beasts leave us be. It's the monsters that we have to worry about." She gently nudged her daughter. "You should get some sleep, Mar. You won't be able to help too much, so maybe you can read in the morning. We'll grab something new from the Archive."

"This is going to affect my magic by a lot, Mom."

Sloane smiled. "You'll just have to get creative. You, me, and..." She glanced at the paladin next to her who nodded. "...Nell will discuss it privately tomorrow."

Her cute, sleepy daughter nodded. "Sounds good, Mom."

Sloane turned her head. "Vesper, make sure no one makes it into her tent."

The cat let out a low growl as it got up and came over. Sloane hugged her daughter and kissed her head before wishing her goodnight, making sure to tell her that she'd be to their shared tent soon. She turned to Nell. "How are things?"

"They're surprisingly fine. I still don't trust her. I don't know why, but she's hiding something. I know Dawn's Rise is busy fighting off *two* monster swarms, but trying to force her way through like this?"

"That has me as well. Why didn't she take the eastern road up to Dayton?"

Nell winced. “That, at least, is an easy answer. According to the guard captain, there is no eastern road anymore. The kingdom has been cut in half. That’s why the reinforcements that arrived in Dellway were so light.”

Sloane paused with her spoon dangling above her bowl. “The kingdom has been cut in half? What?”

“Yes. From the western shores and into the Sovereign Cities where they met up with a smaller swarm heading south. Before they left, the king and his generals were putting together a group that would venture into the Heartwoods and search for the source that is creating all this.”

“Well, shit. That could very well be the first party of heroes of this new age.”

“Party of heroes?”

Sloane shrugged. “A term from my world. They’re probably high leveled, sorry, you’re a Churchie—high stepped.”

Nell chuckled. “*Churchie?* You certainly have a way with words. So, this party is relying on their high steps to help them win where armies aren’t?”

“They’re probably using the army as a distraction. The source... it has to be something like a mana well or fount or even a leak. Something that’s twisting all of these creatures. We’ve seen it monsterize the insects even, so unless the leak is... plugged, then there’s essentially no end to this swarm.”

“That does not sound pleasant, I will pray for their success then.” The dark skinned woman turned her head slightly. “Look alive, company.”

Sloane nodded. “Signal me if she lies?”

“Of course, Miss Rossi.”

“You’re not so bad, Nell. Don’t tell anyone I said that, I have an anti-Church reputation to maintain since Swanbrook.”

The woman smirked. “I wouldn’t dare.”

They both stood as High Priestess Othiwen approached. “Good evening, Evocati, Miss Rossi.”

“High Priestess,” the paladin replied by way of greeting.

The woman was a very pale telv woman, she wore those immaculate robes that looked almost as if they were magicked to keep themselves clean. *Which they very well might be.*

She smiled, showing a hint of perfect teeth. “May I sit with the two of you?”

Sloane returned the smile. “Of course, please,” she said gesturing to the log across from herself. “I was just finishing up.”

“Please, don’t stop eating on my account.”

Sloane chuckled. “Oh, don’t worry. I wasn’t planning on it, this is delicious.”

The woman politely laughed as the three of them sat. “I noticed you were quite busy today, Miss Rossi. I apologize we weren’t able to speak before now. The knight you serve was also unavailable.”

“Oh, I don’t serve a knight. We’re friends. We work together.”

The older woman dipped her head. “Again, my apologies. I meant no offense.”

“What can we do for you, High Priestess?” Nell tried.

“I was eager to acquaint myself with you both, considering our unexpected encounter. You’re bound for Calling, I presume?” the High Priestess inquired.

Affirming with a nod, Sloane elaborated, “Indeed, we are. Our journey involves establishing fortified camps and clearing a path. It’s a tedious process, and we expected the need to return to Dellway for resupply before advancing further.”

“The concept of these temporary camps is quite intriguing,” the High Priestess mused. “I foresee them becoming a standard strategy for travel security.”

“Perhaps.” Sloane glanced at Nell, who gave her a slight raise of a brow. “High Priestess,” Sloane started. “What were you and your people attempting to do? I haven’t known Nell for more than a season, but from what she’s told me, people of your standing typically do not venture out without paladin protection.”

Nell echoed the query. “That is correct, Miss Rossi. I must admit that I am curious, myself.”

The High Priestess studied them both for a moment. “I am on a vital undertaking to reach Nornport. It is of great importance.”

Sloane shrugged. “Alright, you have one carriage that works, but the other will take a few days to repair I think. We’ll be operating out of this camp for a week or so as we clear ahead. I’ll mark down where the other camps are on the road to Dellway.”

The older woman’s expression tightened slightly. “You intend to proceed to Calling?”

Sloane and Nell shared a meaningful look. “Yes, we do. Is there a reason we shouldn’t?”

It was then that High Priestess Othiwen turned to Nell, straightening her posture with an air of authority. Sloane sensed a headache inducing moment unfolding.

“Evocati Nell, as High Priestess of—”

Nell’s interjection was swift and decisive. “No.”

The sudden refusal caught both Sloane and the High Priestess off guard.

“I am under orders from the Archpriestess, herself. My men and I will not be providing you escort to anywhere except back to Calling if you join us.”

Sloane struggled to stop herself from laughing at the look on the High Priestess’s face. It seemed she wasn’t used to someone telling her no, especially not someone else from the Church.

“My mission is—”

“Unfortunately, not my concern. The way behind us should be relatively clear, although, I wouldn’t doubt it if monsters are starting to fill the gaps. Dayton’s forces should be pushing behind us, but they were moving slowly. Nornport’s forces are smaller and dealing with the coastal road. *My* mission does not allow me to deviate.”

The older woman sighed. “It’s the cult, Evocati. I aim to cut off the cult. I received word that there is a terran noble in Nornport with important information about the cult and is escorting a member of said cult to undergo the Rites of Redemption.”

Sloane forced herself to not react.

“And who is this terran noble, High Priestess?” Sloane asked, ignoring Nell’s clenching jaw.

“She is the Head of a House Reinhart. A baroness I believe. Does that name mean anything to you, Miss Rossi?” the woman asked, her eyes searching Sloane’s.

But they would find nothing. She wasn’t an amateur at these types of games.

She made a show of considering it. “The name sounds familiar, I admit. I believe I heard it in one of the taverns I was staying at in the city. But I must admit, I’m just me. In your world, I’m just classified as just a commoner.”

“In my world?”

“Yeah, back home we didn’t have nobles really. Most nations had moved on from that, you know? I was just a normal woman, like everyone else. Even the prime minister of the nation I resided in would be considered a commoner here. Although, I don’t much agree with her politics, if I must say so myself. But that’s neither here nor there.”

Sloane winced. “I apologize, I ran this conversation off track. I have to admit, I’m not really comfortable when it comes to conversations like this,” she said with a twirling of her finger. “I’m just trying to find my place in this world.”

The woman’s expression softened. “I understand dear. It is truly tragic what befell your people...”

“I’m sorry for interrupting, but I’ve heard that over and over from people. Yet, no one really seems to care. My people are constantly getting taken advantage of. I guess I could expect it. If people came to Earth like we did, I’m sure the governments of the world would have done the same thing. But

still, it sucks when it's being done to you." She looked at Nell and gave an apologetic look that had the woman look at her with a bemused expression. "Like, take Evocati Nell here, she's a nice woman, but she's been ordered to escort my friend Ser Nemura to your Archpriestess. I heard about the nastiness that happened with that cult you were talking about, but I really don't want to get in the middle of your little Church love spat, you know? But I love the friends I've made here, so I'm tagging along. I'm sure you understand."

The High Priestess's frown grew more pronounced as she turned towards Nell. "You've received orders for an escort mission to the Archpriestess? This is highly irregular. Why?" Her voice was tinged with a mix of confusion and skepticism.

Nell clenched her jaw, her frustration barely concealed. "The specifics of the order are not for disclosure, High Priestess. I am duty-bound to comply, and I shall do so without question."

Momentary irritation flashed across the High Priestess's face, quickly masked by a veneer of calm as she stood abruptly. "Well, it appears we are at an impasse. We cannot proceed alone in our current state. Might we request the honor of accompanying you on your journey to the capital?"

Nell and Sloane stood up, and the paladin saluted. "Of course, it would be our privilege, High Priestess. With the help of your guardsmen and magic users, I'm sure we will be able to speedily return."

Once the High Priestess departed, Nell turned to Sloane, her scowl evident. "Really?"

Sloane maintained her composure. "She's none the wiser, and I'll handle Nemura."

"You know she's going to just *love* this change of events."

"Don't worry about her. She's—"

"Already playing a role she's uncomfortable with, for your sake."

Sloane winced. "How long have you known?"

The woman rolled her sunflower colored eyes. "Since the beginning. I know her culture, Sloane. No matter how she feels about you, you're not overcoming a thousand years of what being a knight *means* to a Vlaredian. She does *not* like it, in fact, she's struggling but her loyalty to you compels her to adapt."

A heavy sigh escaped Sloane. "I suppose I should thank you for not pressing on yet another thing."

Nell's hand rested reassuringly on Sloane's shoulder. "You're a remarkable leader. Nemura, Stefan, and your daughter are commendable companions. I've had worse assignments, but protecting you and ensuring your safe passage to Gwyneth is an honor I take seriously. You have my word and support, *Your Majesty*."

Sloane grimaced. “You know—”

Nell’s knowing smile was somewhat irksome. “Yes, I know the truth behind that one too. I *am* able to tell when people are lying to both me and themselves.”

“Well, I guess it’s time to bring you into the fold properly.”

The woman’s victorious smile was irritating. “Relena’s dead tits, it’s about time.”

Sloane narrowed her eyes. “Did you just use one of your goddess’s names as a swear?”

Nell’s head tilted playfully. “So? Is that seen negatively on Earth?”

“Well, it’s generally considered disrespectful, but it’s not unheard of.”

“Then we’re not so different after all,” Nell concluded with a shrug.



“We’re ready to move to the next point,” Nemura reported.

Sloane nodded. It had been two weeks of fighting to get to the point where they would move on. It was almost as if the priestess and her escort had tried to avoid any and all combat in their mad dash to make it through the monster’s lines.

“Nell still doesn’t want to just make a run for it, yes?”

“Even I don’t think that’s a good idea. The Church group lost a third of their people trying that and they assumed it was ‘acceptable losses’. I refuse to force a greater chance of losing any of our group. We have a plan, let’s stick to it. We don’t need to rush. We’ll reach Calling by the end of Summer. We finish up with Mariel’s business, then we find a ship and leave. We’ll be in Avira by the end of Autumn.”

“Which we’ll be close to where people know Gwyn in the Duchy of Tiloral. Gwyn said who to find there, but I couldn’t hear her.”

Nemura bent over so she could look Sloane in the eye. “We have time. Gwyn’s not going anywhere, and she knows you’re coming. You’re not stopping, nothing is keeping you back. You’re being *safe*. That is what counts. If we rush, we risk getting injured or worse.”

“You’re right. But even with us trying to be safe, this next leg is going to be very dangerous.”

“It will.”

“And we won’t have Mariel’s support.”

“We won’t. But we’ll have twenty-two additional people. That counts for something. Plus their mage and two healers. But, I have a plan for that.”

Sloane tilted her head. “What’s that?”

“We’re going to have them secure the camp site while we move ahead to clear the outskirts of the village. Then when we get back, we’ll help.”

“Why do that?”

“Because Tib’s scouting has revealed that this area is *much* denser in monsters than areas we’ve cleared before. We’ll get overrun if we try to... what was it that you called it?”

“Turtle up?”

Nemura smiled. “Yes. If we strike ahead a bit, we’ll be able to utilize Mariel’s magic, as well. We push, get into a spot where the rest of us can circle around you two along with Vesper and we let you all loose.”

Sloane sucked in a breath. It was dangerous, but Nemura was in charge of their planning for a reason. The woman had a head for small unit tactics. If she believed it was the best use of their abilities, she’d believe her.

She just hoped it didn’t bit them in the ass.

“Alright. Let’s do it.”



“Get in formation!” Nell shouted. “This point won’t defend itself.”

Sloane aimed her caster and fired another **[Mana Bolt]** at a skittering insectoid monster that looked like a wingless hornet. Twin beams of arcane energy shot forward, sizzling through another monster that tried to get around the line of guardsmen that were guarding the small hill. Vesper was filling any gap she could with lethal efficiency.

The chaos of battle swirled around them as Sloane swiftly reloaded her caster. The air was filled with the metallic clinks of armor, the shouts of warriors, and the eerie chittering of the insectoid monsters. Nell, standing firm and resolute, directed the paladins and guardsmen, her voice a beacon of authority amidst the pandemonium.

Sloane’s eyes narrowed as she took aim once more. Another **[Mana Bolt]** surged from her caster, its bright trail cutting through the dimming light of the evening. The bolt struck true, halting



another monstrous creature in its tracks. The smell of singed chitin filled the air as the beast crumpled to the ground.

Beside her, Stefan swung his blade with lethal precision as he took care of anything that got close as the two of them stood as the last line of defense of the wagons. Well, them and the crossbowmen who were atop the two armored carriages firing bolts into the fray.

As the battle reached its climax, Nell's voice rose above the din, commanding and clear. "Push them back!" she ordered.

With renewed vigor, the paladins and guardsmen surged forward, their armor gleaming in the fading light. Sloane and Stefan fought back-to-back, their movements synchronized and deadly.

In a final, concerted effort, the defenders drove the creatures back, their retreat a cacophony of screeches and hisses. Exhausted but victorious, Sloane and her companions watched as the last of the monsters disappeared into the darkening forest.

After clean up, Nemura walked over, wiping the blood off of her warhammer while the guardsmen moved about to prepare the site. "Alright. You know the plan?"

Sloane nodded. "Yup, portal time. This is a bit further than usual, but I should be good."

The tall telv turned to the guard captain. "We're moving ahead with our strike. Get this camp up and going as soon as possible. We'll be back to help just before sunset."

"Understood, Ser." The man turned and started yelling at his men. Sloane was about to delve into her **[Golem Sight]** when the high priestess emerged from the armored carriage. Suppressing a sigh, she stood and watched as the woman quickly moved to join her and Nemura.

"Miss Rossi, I appreciate what your group is doing, but again, I must insist that you allow the young Mariel in your group to stay here where it's safe."

"The safest place for her is at my side," Sloane said slowly. "She's coming with us."

"Yeah! I'm going," the girl in question called out as she ran to join them. "We're a team. We stick together."

The high priestess frowned as she looked to Nell for support who had joined them. The paladin in question shrugged. "She's made her choice. The girl goes with us."

"Hmph. I am disappointed in you Evocati, that you are putting your mission before even a child's safety."

Nell narrowed her eyes, but before she could say anything Sloane stepped over and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Come on, she's baiting you. We have a job to do." Sloane glanced back at the high priestess. "Ensure your people have the camp ready for our return, High Priestess."

The woman was a bitch.

Sloane would not be leaving Mariel with her no matter what occurred in Calling. Her daughter was staying at her side and she wouldn't leave her unattended with that woman ever.

“Mar, you ready?”

“Ready!”

Nemura gestured to Stefan as the paladins came close. Sloane glared at the High Priestess until she backed away with a scowl on her face. They didn't need to like each other, and Sloane knew she would never like the woman. She was too shifty, hiding too much that could affect them.

One of the paladins, a woman with tight cornrows, smiled at Sloane as she hefted the halberd to her shoulder. “Portal time?”

Sloane nodded. “Portal time. Don't throw up this time, yeah?”

The men around the woman laughed and she shook her head. “I'm never living that down am I?”

Nell clapped the woman on the back. “Never. Look alive. It's going to be hell as soon as we enter. You all know the plan.”

Sloane's attention turned to her excerpt reader as she pulled up its connection to Tiberius. Her, or rather, Nemura's scout golem was flying over the area they were about to portal to.

Sloane's eyes narrowed as she scanned the bird's eye view on the excerpt reader. The outskirts of the village swarmed with monsters, an unsettling mass of movement and chaos. It was exactly as they had anticipated, but the reality was always more daunting than the plan.

“We're going to drop right into the thick of it,” she announced, her voice steady despite the adrenaline surging through her veins.

As Sloane activated the portal, the air around them shimmered, a window opening to the chaos-ridden outskirts of the village. She took a deep breath, feeling the familiar rush of adrenaline—not to be confused with essentia after leveling—that came with the use of the magic. Tiberius provided the precise coordinates, ensuring their landing would be as strategic as possible.

The paladins lined up, ready to breach. Shields raised and halberds angled menacingly, they plunged into the portal as soon as it stabilized like the disciplined force they were braving the unknown. Nemura, Nell, and Stefan followed closely, their expressions set in grim resolve. They were a bulwark against the tide of monstrosities that awaited them.

Sloane glanced at Mariel, seeing her own determination mirrored in her daughter's eyes. “Let's go,” she said quietly so no one would overhear. “We'll need those **[Bone Walls]** up quick. Two entrances, remember? Just enough for us to control the flow.”

Mariel nodded, her expression focused and determined. “Got it, Mom.”

Together, they stepped through the portal, Vesper’s massive form flanking them.

The world shifted around them, replaced by the chaotic outskirts of the village. The air was filled with the sounds of battle—the clash of steel, the roars of monsters, and the shouts of their allies.

Immediately, Mariel sprang into action, her hands weaving through the air as she conjured **[Bone Walls]** around them. The walls rose with eerie speed, forming a protective barrier with only two strategically placed entrances.

Sloane raised her caster, the familiar weight of the weapon grounding her as she prepared to unleash her magic. She could feel Vesper’s power thrumming in the air as her **[Arcane Lances]** lashed out at the monsters.

That was when the reptilian ones burst from the treeline.

Nemura’s voice bellowed out, “Sloane! Incoming! Bones, get the ones coming from the opposite treeline!”

“On it!” mother and daughter responded, each moving back to back.

Sloane’s fingers danced through the air, weaving a complex tapestry of mana and arcane knowledge. The air around her shimmered with energy as she employed her **[Runic Knowledge]** and **[Arcanomancy]** to craft intricate runes formed with only mana. Each rune pulsed with power, aligning in a precise formation in front of her. With a final, decisive gesture, she completed the sequence, and her **[Arcane Mortar]** fired.

As she released the spell, a brilliant mass of concentrated arcane energy burst forth, streaking towards the treeline. The impact was devastating, a bright explosion that sent shockwaves through the ranks of the monstrous creatures. Several of the dinosaur-like beasts were obliterated instantly, their forms disintegrating under the overwhelming force.

Yet, as the dust settled, it was evident that their numbers were too great; her attack, while powerful, was merely a drop in the ocean of their swarming mass.

Nemura’s voice cut through the cacophony of battle, urgent and commanding. “Faster, hit the ones in the front line!” She barked out the order, her tone brooking no argument.

Without a word, Sloane shifted her focus, her mind racing to adapt to the relentless onslaught. Extending her hand, she used **[Arcane Barrage]**, her mana coalescing into multiple projectiles of seething arcane energy. The missiles formed and launched with precision, hurtling towards the advancing horde.

Each missile found its mark, tearing through the monsters with ruthless efficiency, rending flesh and bone in bursts of arcane destruction.

As she unleashed her fury, a new sound erupted behind her—the unmistakable sound of something bursting through the ground, followed by a chorus of unearthly screeches. Then, piercing through the din of battle, came her daughter's voice, filled with excitement and determination. “Go, Ser Boney!” she cried.

Sloane didn't need to look back to know that Mariel had unleashed her own brand of magic, commanding the skeletal warrior to attack. The animated bones, empowered by Mariel's necromancy, had joined the fray, adding another layer of defense and offense to their relentless fight.

Sloane's world had narrowed to a point, the sounds of battle resonating in her ears like a thunderous symphony, each clash and roar blending into a cacophony of the fight. The monsters were even fighting each other to get to them.

She heard, rather than saw, the grenades go off periodically as paladins, Stefan, or Nemura tossed them. Each one punctuated by a flash of light or an explosion of crackling energy. At some point, Stefan came and grabbed her caster and pouches.

She only caught sight of him using it once, a hand on the shoulder of one of the paladins while the other aimed over the shields and fired into some large insectoid.

Sloane didn't even know how much time had passed as everything raged on. It could have been minutes or hours, it wouldn't have mattered.

Her vision tunneled, focusing solely on the bone wall before her and the chaos she wrought beyond it. Her mind was a whirling storm of tactical calculations and spell formulations, each decision made in the blink of an eye, each spell cast with precision born of desperation and raw determination.

Then what she was waiting for happened.

“Mom! I need a hand!” Mariel's voice cut through the din, snapping Sloane back to the immediacy of their situation. “Swap!”

Instinctively, Sloane's hand reached behind, grasping her daughter's side in a firm grip. With a practiced maneuver, the two spun in a seamless motion, swapping positions. Her **[Bone Armor]** clad daughter immediately took up where Sloane had left off as did the mother.

As Sloane faced the new threat, her eyes took in the scene in a split second—the remains of a skeletal dinosaur being swarmed by a horde of smaller, ferocious creatures, their teeth and claws tearing into the bones. Ser Boney and a decreasing number of mindless skeletons were engaged in a fierce battle with another massive reptile that reminded her of a spinosaurus but with longer, more menacing arms that tried to ward off its attackers.

Without hesitation, Sloane lifted her hand and fired another **[Arcane Barrage]**. The air around her hands crackled with arcane energy, the raw power of her magic coalescing into glowing orbs

of destructive force. She aimed towards the pack of smaller dinosaurs, her mind clear and focused, her resolve unshakable. The missiles shot forward, streaking across the battlefield like rockets, each one finding its target with deadly accuracy. The impact was immediate and devastating, the smaller creatures were ravaged, body parts torn off with every other hit.

She heard the loud meow of a large feline, and Sloane knew it was a signal from Vesper. She used **[Surge]** and felt mana rush from her toward a source nearby. Her golem *roared* and she caught sight of beams firing out at a more rapid pace.

Several flying monsters were shot down by those beams, while a loud screech sounded before a small missile of a bird took down another by claw and beak.

Mother and daughter, most of the time back to back, but sometimes side-by-side, fired spell after spell into the monsters, eating away at their numbers with increasing efficiency. The two of them constantly swapped sides, using their magic in ways that handled certain situations better.

Mariel's shadow and bone and Sloane's arcane. With the pace and hecticness of the fight, she simply fired **[Arcane Barrage]** almost without end, but she knew she couldn't keep that up the entire time. So, as it strained her mental stamina, she would switch to **[Mana Bolts]** that were almost free at this point thanks to her refinement. It was one of the few things that had actually changed since then—all of her mage spells were almost half again as efficient on her stamina.

She rose her hand as another pack of monsters crawled over the carcass of some dead reptile thing and fired an **[Arcane Barrage]**.

The battle raged on, the air thick with the stench of blood and the sounds of steel clashing against chitinous armor. Amidst the cacophony, a sudden shout from one of the paladins pierced the chaos.

Sloane's instincts kicked in instantly.

Her head whipped to the left, her hand instinctively rising in a defensive gesture. Her eyes widened as she witnessed a monstrous scene unfold. A gargantuan praying mantis-like creature, its serrated limbs slicing through the air, as it cleaved through one of the lesser monsters in its path, its mandibles clicking with predatory fervor. Then, as if it were a puppy playing in a pile of leaves in Autumn, the monster burst through the **[Bone Wall]**.

The monster entered their perimeter like a drunken boxer. Vesper tried to get in the way, and but was just a bit slow. The mantid tried to bash her out of the way, but the big steel golem barely budged, still Sloane cast her **[Emergency Repair (Mechanical)]** just in case.

Undeterred, the creature changed direction suddenly as it lunged towards the paladins, one of its massive arms swiping aside a warrior with frightening ease. Another paladin, positioned

strategically, braced for impact, and the mantis's limb crashed against their shield, sending a reverberating shockwave through the air. The man lashed out with his halberd, but the mantid snatched it from the air and broke it like a twig. It tossed it aside and the paladin barely dove out of the way from the retaliation of its scythe-like limb.

Nemura, like the beautiful Amazonian she was, stood her ground as the beast next turned its attention towards her. The mantid lashed out, its arm moving so fast that it appeared like a blur to Sloane, but Nemura bashed it aside almost contemptuously. Then with a fluid motion, she raised her warhammer and slammed it into the creature's leg with some ability. The impact was monumental, the sound of cracking exoskeleton echoing as the monster's leg buckled beneath it. The follow through used the spike on the other side of the hammer to puncture a second leg.

The mantis, even unbalanced, lurched forward at another, seemingly weaker, target with a primal ferocity, its eyes fixated on Sloane.

But before it could reach her, two **[Arcane Lances]** lashed out. The beams of pure magical energy intersected, forming a deadly cross that sliced through the air.

In a brilliant display of Vesper's arcane power—and Sloane's crafter ability, the lances bisected the monstrous mantis. The creature's upper half slid away from its lower, the two parts falling to the ground with a heavy thud. Its viscous ichor spilled onto the earth, sizzling as it mixed with the dirt and debris of the battlefield.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still, the aftermath of the destruction hanging heavily in the air. Then everyone reacted.

“Bones!” Nemura shouted.

“Got it!” affirmed the squeaky Acolyte of Death.

The **[Bone Wall]** was reformed, the paladins regrouped, and Sloane's heart pounded in her chest from the close call.

From then on, it was as if every movement, every spell, was a dance of life and death.

Despite her increasing fatigue, Sloane moved with a fluid grace, her body and mind in perfect harmony as she moved to each new target. The air around her hummed with the power of her magic, the ground beneath her feet trembling with the force of her spells.

Her daughter's magic turned portions of their surrounding black, while bones erupted from the ground or formed in the air and lashed out at the monsters.

Even though their fight against the creatures raged on, it was punctuated by moments of tense, hard fought quiet.

In these lulls, Sloane and her companions caught their breath, ignoring the grotesque scene as monsters scavenged the remains of their fallen kin in the distance. They established a rhythm of sorts: intense fighting followed by brief rests, then periods of lighter skirmishes before another pause.

Luckily, Vesper was able to continue without rest, and during the short respites that came randomly, her golem would use her invisibility to go hunting, something that gave them a bit more rest.

This pattern repeated under the slowly arching sun.

Sloane felt the weight of exhaustion pressing down on her, each spell cast a further drain on her already taxed reserves.

Behind her, Mariel, although visibly fatigued, displayed remarkable fortitude. With a focus beyond her years, she directed the skeletal remains of some smaller wolf like beasts, now her minions, to lead other creatures away on some merry chase that brought a small smile to her daughter's otherwise weary face, buying precious moments of respite.

It was during one such break that a thunderous screech, louder and more ominous than any they had heard before, erupted from the village.

"That's our cue!" Nemura bellowed, her voice slicing through the air with urgency. Sloane watched as Mariel commanded Ser Boney to return.

As the skeletal warrior disengaged, Mariel effortlessly directed the skeleton back to her, where it disassembled into a cascade of bones, swirling through the air to be neatly stored in her spatial satchel. Her armor followed suit, pieces almost magnetically drawn to their storage, signaling her readiness for the next phase.

With Mariel ready, and evidence of her magic hidden, Sloane turned and conjured her [**Arcane Gate**], her hands splayed wide as she directed the arcane energies. A shimmering portal stabilized, standing as a gateway back to safety. "It's up!" she called out, her voice carrying the weight of both relief and urgency.

"Everyone in! Vesper, you're last!" Nemura commanded, her voice brooking no dissent.

The golem positioned herself at the forefront, unleashing a barrage of energy beams at the encroaching monsters prowling slowly from the village. Sloane, tapping into her reserves, cast [**Surge**] upon Vesper, amplifying its already formidable power. The golem's form crackled with enhanced energy, its attacks doubling in intensity and size.

One by one, the paladins darted through the portal, Mariel amongst them, with practiced efficiency. The rest followed in quick succession, each warrior disappearing into the arcane threshold.

Finally, as Vesper backed through the portal, Sloane, with a gesture of finality, collapsed the gateway, cutting off their connection to the battlefield.

The aftermath left them in a momentary stillness, a sharp contrast to the chaos they had just endured. Sloane's heart pounded in her ears, a rhythmic echo of the battle's intensity.

"We're still far from the camp, we're going to have to hoof it the rest of the way," Nemura said.

After a brief respite to catch their breath, the group resumed their journey, jogging with a determined pace back toward the camp. The fatigue of the day's battles weighed heavily on them, evident in the slight stumbles and the labored breathing that accompanied their movements. Among them, Mariel was visibly struggling the most. Her steps faltered, and Sloane quickly adjusted her pace, moving to her daughter's side.

With a gentle yet firm grasp, Sloane helped Mariel, lifting her onto her back. The weight was more than just physical; it was the burden of concern and care.

Nemura glanced over with a mix of worry and respect. "You got her?" she inquired, her tone reflecting both concern and confidence in Sloane's ability.

"I've got her," Sloane replied.

Without a word, the paladins maintained a tight formation around Sloane and Mariel as they moved. It was a simple act that Sloane appreciated greatly. The journey back was marked by a silent camaraderie, a mutual understanding born from the trials they had just endured.

*Just another day on the road to Calling.*

It was a scene they'd known all too well. The portal was a bit new, but they'd always had it as a backup option in case things got tough. This time, it meant that they could get far enough away from prying eyes that they could still utilize Mariel's magic.

*Clearing that village is going to take more than just us though. People are likely going to die.*

As the camp finally came into view, its makeshift palisade offering a semblance of security, torches flickered at the entrance, casting dancing shadows that beckoned them with the promise of rest. The warm glow of a campfire was visible, its light a beacon in the encroaching dusk.

The guardsmen at the entrance stepped aside for them as they entered, but almost immediately upon their arrival, the high priestess seemed to notice Mariel's weary form on Sloane's back.

She stepped forward, perhaps with a mix of concern and curiosity but Sloane didn't care. She just wanted the woman away from her daughter.

But before she could reach them, Stefan interposed himself. "She's fine. Just tired," he stated, his voice a shield of calm assurance against any unwarranted intrusion. His stance, though not aggressive, left no room for doubt or debate.



## Oxylus

The high priestess, momentarily halted, seemed to weigh her options before nodding slightly and stepping back, allowing the group the space they needed.

“We’ll get our tents ready,” Nell said.

Sloane nodded. “Let’s get Mar down to sleep in the wagon, then I’ll go start enchanting.”

“Sounds good.”

Sloane turned to Nemura who smiled. “Don’t worry. I’ll stay with the little one while you work.”

“Thanks, Nemmy.”

Sloane, with careful steps, made her way to their wagon, gently laying Mariel down for a well-deserved rest amidst the wool blankets that promised comfort and safety. Nemura sat nearby, already holding a piece of wood to carve.

Once assured her daughter was settled, Sloane turned away, steeling herself for the night ahead, a tapestry of moonlight and shadows her only companions as she delved into a long, meticulous night of enchanting and work with one of the paladins to provide protection as she got to work. The quiet of the camp, punctuated only by the occasional crackle of the campfire and the distant murmurs of the people within, enveloped her in a world where magic and duty intertwined seamlessly.

They were almost through.

Just a bit more. The worst was behind them.

She didn’t need Nell to tell her that was a lie.