
Encroaching Darkness

They made it out of the city without issues, in fact, the entire travel through the night went smoothly. They'd even stopped every couple of hours or so to rest and relieve themselves, but other than that, the journey continued.

It was also why Sloane wasn't surprised when trouble appeared.

"Ho! Travelers!" a telv man called out from atop his horse. He rode at the front of a group of six riders, each looking like soldiers from the city.

Sloane and the other eleven people looked like normal travelers, if a bit better attired. Yemina was the only one who clearly looked the part, and thus, she took the lead.

"Eona's Blessing upon you!" Yemina called out, the sun elf woman keeping her features hidden beneath a helmet. "We mean no harm! Just traveling through!"

Sloane watched the scene unfold, her gaze sharp and alert as the telv soldier gestured for his men to move forward. They were all on horseback, their armor glinting in the sunlight, and their eyes scanning the group of travelers with a mix of curiosity and suspicion.

Sloane's group, on the other hand, was on foot. Getting a wagon out of the city would have been too difficult, and so they had opted to travel light.

Vesper, cloaked and invisible to all, was loaded down with their supplies. The golem was essentially a mobile magical turret, a formidable defense should they need it.

Hopefully, it doesn't come to that.

The soldiers halted a respectable distance away, their horses snorting and pawing at the ground. The telv man's curious expression turned into a frown as he surveyed the group. "You are heading toward the front. Travel has been forbidden, ser knight," he stated, his voice carrying a note of authority.

Yemina, who had taken the lead, responded with a casual shrug. "I am guiding these people away from the war and to safety. They are not citizens of Swanbrook, and thus feel the call of returning home to be with their families," she explained, her voice steady and calm.

The soldier seemed to consider her words, his eyes flicking over the group once more. Sloane could only hope that their disguise as simple travelers would hold up under scrutiny. They couldn't

afford any delays or complications, not when they were so close to escaping the city and the looming threat of the cultists.

“Where is home?” the man asked after a moment.

“We’re heading to the village of Keld, nestled in the mountains east of Cartaelk,” Yemina replied, her tone steady despite the man’s suspicious gaze.

At the mention of the village, another soldier perked up. “Keld?” he called out, his brow furrowing in confusion. “I’m from Keld, and I don’t recognize any of you.”

Fucking seriously? Damn it.

His words hung in the air, a challenge that demanded an answer. The group exchanged glances, their expressions hopefully unreadable beneath the hoods and scarves they wore to shield themselves from the chill of the early morning air.

Yemina, however, didn’t miss a beat. “That’s not surprising,” she replied, her voice carrying a note of amusement. “We’ve been living in Swanbrook for the past few years. It’s only now that we’ve decided to return home.”

Sloane held her breath, drawing mana into her core, readying herself for action despite the hope that their ruse would hold.

The leader of the soldiers narrowed his eyes, his gaze hardening as he made his decision. “I’m afraid we’re going to have to detain you,” he announced, his voice carrying a note of finality.

Sloane didn’t hesitate. She raised her hand in a swift, practiced motion as she channeled cast two **[Flashbangs]**.

The spells detonated with a loud crack, releasing a blinding flash of light that filled the air. The horses, caught off guard, reared in surprise, their whinnies of fear echoing through the quiet morning air. A couple of the soldiers were thrown from their mounts, landing in the dirt with grunts of surprise and pain.

Without missing a beat, Yemina, Nemura, and Stefan rushed forward.

They moved with a precision and efficiency that spoke of their training and experience, quickly subduing the disoriented soldiers.

Clearly taking extra care to not cause any serious injuries, to incapacitate, not to harm.

In the chaos, Sloane kept her eye on the leader of the soldiers as she saw him struggling to regain his bearings, his hand reaching for the sword at his side.

But before he could draw his weapon, Nemura was upon him, she quickly struck him with a swift, precise blow, knocking him out cold.

As the chaos settled, Sloane looked around at the subdued soldiers and took a deep breath. They had managed to avoid a potentially dangerous situation, but they had also just attacked soldiers of Swanbrook.

There would be consequences if they stayed, she knew, but they had no other choice.

Despite also being affected by her spells, the four guards accompanying Toren and Ilian moved forward to help restrain the soldiers.

When they were done, Sloane nodded. "Let's move," she ordered, her voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through her veins. "We need to put as much distance between us and them as possible."

Without wasting any more time, they quickly continued on their way, leaving the unconscious soldiers behind.



Later, Sloane peered down at her watch's screen, watching intently as it displayed Tiberius's **[Golem Sight]**. When she looked back up at the group, she sighed.

"Where do they keep getting all of these people?" Sloane asked anyone and no one.

Yemina looked over her shoulder at Sloane's watch and scowled. "Those who make promises of a better life often find the disillusioned are quite susceptible to small overtures."

Sloane just looked around at those with her, the guards had moved aside their long traveler's cloaks, their armor and weapons now revealed. None of them sans herself had any semblance of a ranged weapon.

"I count at least forty," Yemina said, her expression grim. "But there is some solace..."

Stefan walked over and glanced down at the watch and winced. "What's that?"

"However they have been tracking us is clearly not accurate," the paladin responded.

Nemura looked up from where she sat. "How do you figure?"

"They've been tracking you?" Lord Estos asked, his brows furrowed in thought.

Yemina ignored him as she responded to Nemura. "There was often a lot of time in between attacks on us. Some were quick, and even the attack on the estate took time while I suspect they were verifying our presence. Whatever method they are using to track us, must not be accurate at any great range. Otherwise, they would be on us. They are clearly searching. I would not be surprised if this is but a small portion of what they have."

Sloane looked at the Rosale nobleman and gave him a small smile. "If it helps, this is a theory we have only recently suspected."

The man seemed to consider her words before nodding slowly. "What do we do? We cannot fight them with what we have."

"Well, you can't... but I could," Sloane said with a sigh.

Nemura shook her head. "Not safely. All it takes is one archer to escape your notice, and an arrow hits you in the back. Also, you do not know how many... mages... they have. Things have changed since Marketbol. We need to avoid them as much as possible."

Sloane reluctantly nodded in agreement. She knew Nemura was right, but it didn't make the situation any less frustrating. "Alright," she conceded, her voice carrying a note of resignation.

Nemura then turned to Lord Estos, her expression serious. "Do you have a map I could use?" she asked.

The nobleman gestured to his moon elf agent, who promptly pulled out a map from his bag and handed it to Nemura.

She unrolled the map on the ground, gesturing for Sloane to come closer. "Can you have Tiberius go higher and get a look at the area?" she asked, her gaze focused on the map.

Sloane nodded, channeling her mana into the connection she shared with her golems. She sent a bit of intent, instructing Tiberius to ascend. The view on her watch changed as the mechanical falcon rose higher, the trees and cultists below becoming smaller until Tiberius was looking at the surrounding area from a bird's eye view.

Nemura studied the view on Sloane's watch, then pointed at a location on the map. "They are here," she said, her finger indicating a spot on the map. "If we veer further west toward the coast, we should be able to avoid them."

Sloane looked back down at her watch, her eyes widening as she saw a small light flare up from where the cultists were. Tiberius let out a surprised screech as he banked hard to avoid the incoming spell. He looked back down at the camp, seeing two more flashes of light before two more spells were launched in his direction.

The mechanical falcon dove and quickly moved out of range, narrowly avoiding the spells. Sloane let out a sigh of relief as Tiberius escaped unscathed, while Nemura watched the scene unfold with wide eyes.

"I guess that answers the question of whether they have mages," Sloane said, her voice dry. "You're right. We do need to avoid them."

Nemura handed the map back to the House Estos agent before turning to Sloane. “We need to move. Now,” she said, her voice carrying a note of urgency.



“There are another two groups,” Sloane announced. “One is moving almost directly toward us.”

Sloane's announcement was met with a chorus of groans from the group.

Ilian Estos turned to her with a concerned look on his face. “How many are in these groups?” he asked, his voice tense.

Sloane didn't hesitate. “At least forty each,” she replied, her focus still set on her watch.

Yemina stepped forward. “May I see?” she asked, gesturing to Sloane's watch.

Sloane held up her wrist, allowing Yemina to observe the view from Tiberius.

The paladin's eyes narrowed as she studied the screen, her finger pointing at a particular figure. “What is that man there doing?”

Sloane looked down at her watch, sending a command to Tiberius to focus on the man Yemina had indicated.

As the image zoomed in, they saw a man holding something and pointing ahead... directly toward where the group was currently and gesturing animatedly as he spoke to two others.

Yemina let out a sigh. “That's how they're tracking us. Whatever that object is.”

Sloane nodded in agreement. “Yup. So, that solves something for us.”

The group turned to her, their expressions filled with curiosity and apprehension.

Ilian was the one to voice their question. “What does it solve?” he asked, a bit of hesitance in his voice.

I bet he's never done anything like this. Luckily, this shit is just about all I've done since arriving here.

Sloane met his eyes and smiled. “We're going through that group. We can't avoid them, so we're going to wipe them out and run like hell afterward before the other two groups catch up.”

Before anyone could respond, a slight vibration from her watch caught Sloane's attention. She looked down to see... another group. She closed her eyes for a moment, taking in the new information, before nodding. “Make that three groups... Tib found another one with a bit more

people. We can't fight them all, and we can't hesitate. We have to get through the one group that we know is actually tracking us. And destroy whatever that object is.”

Stefan spoke up. “Or take it...” he suggested. At Sloane's confused look, he elaborated, “What? You're the magical item expert. If you have it in your possession, you can figure out a way to counter it, *right?*”

Fuck. Why didn't I think of that?

Sloane felt a huge urge to facepalm. “That's brilliant, Stefan. Let's do it.”

Ilian looked around at the group with a slightly more determined look that was probably forced. *Relatable, my dude. Relatable.*

“What do you want us to do?” he asked.

Sloane gave him a reassuring smile. “Your guards are loaded with all of the things you guys wanted to bring, so Yemina will stay with you. I just want you and Toren to help her protect Mariel and hold onto the supplies Vesper is wearing.”

Yemina appeared ready to argue, but Sloane just shook her head. “Yemina, follow slowly behind us. As soon as the group is taken care of, we rush forward and continue on.”

One of the guards squinted his eyes and asked, “Vesper?”

Ilian chuckled nervously, and Vesper reappeared next to Sloane, surprising the guards.

Sloane smiled, her eyes gleaming with determination. “She's been with us this whole time,” she said while placing a lazy hand on the golem's head. “But now it's time to hunt.”



Sloane, Nemura, and Stefan moved stealthily through the dense undergrowth, their steps light and careful as Vesper padded silently alongside them. Sloane's focus was frequently drawn to her watch, using Tiberius's aerial view to guide their path towards the group tracking them.

“They're veering towards us,” Sloane whispered, her eyes scanning the display on her watch. “Their accuracy is clearly better the closer they get.”

Nemura nodded. “That confirms it then. They're tracking you, not Mariel.”

Sloane sighed, her hand unconsciously reaching out to touch Vesper's flank. “That's good, actually. As a last resort, I can hop on Vesper and lead them away.”

Stefan shook his head. “No, last resort you use your siege spell and destroy them, no matter the collateral.”

Sloane nodded, her mind already racing with strategies. “I’ll hit the edges of the group with two of them, but they take a lot out of me. And this group is fairly spread out.”

She turned to Vesper, her voice firm. “When we start, you have to sneak through the group and to the man Tiberius is keeping an eye on, get the device he’s using then cause chaos on your way out but don’t get hurt. Understand?”

Vesper let out a low, predatory growl, the sound vibrating through the air.

Sloane took it as an affirmation and gestured for the others to join her in their semi-stealthy approach.

As they neared the cultists, the man tracking them began to call out. It was clear they knew Sloane was close.

The cultists started to spread out, a couple of them raising magical shields.

Sloane winced, turning to Vesper. “It’s time,” she said, and the golem disappeared, rushing off towards the cultists.

Sloane used Tiberius’s aerial view to aim her [**Arcane Mortar**] at the left flank of the group. The spell launched into the air, soaring over the trees, and the shouting of the cultists became audible even from their distance. As the mortar exploded with a loud burst that shook the area, Sloane launched another one.

But as it arched into the air, a spell surged up from the ground and collided with the projectile, causing it to explode prematurely.

“We need to move forward,” Sloane told Nemura and Stefan, keeping her eyes on the chaos in front of them.

As they moved, she drew mana into herself, forming several [**Mana Bolts**] above her head, and activated the [**Spell Buckler**] from her watch, holding it protectively in front of herself.

When the cultists came into view, with not nearly as many killed as she’d hoped from her first attack, she released the [**Mana Bolts**].

They flew forward, slamming into four cultists before she unleashed an [**Arcane Barrage**], aiming the spell at the centermost portion of the group that was rushing toward them.

Bolts of pure arcane fury launched from her, each exploding into the front line of the cultists until a magical shield tried to form in front of them but was quickly destroyed by Sloane’s spell.

Stefan shouted a warning as a mage among the cultists cast a spell, creating a large spike of ice that hurtled toward them.

Nemura was quick to react. The telv woman lifted her large kite shield and used an ability that caused her to pulse with energy and set herself into a defensive stance.

A moment later, the ice spike crashed into the shield, shattering into a shower of glittering shards.

The battlefield was a scene of chaos, with the cultists scrambling to regroup and counterattack.

Sloane kept up her attack as the first few cultists reached them and engaged Nemura and Stefan. She yanked out a grenade, slammed her thumb against the activation button, and threw it then reached for another one before the first **[Arcane Explosion]** went off.

A screech of warning sounded and Sloane didn't even hesitate before ducking behind the sturdy trunk of a nearby tree.

The move was just in time, as an ice spike and a volley of arrows whizzed past the space she had just vacated, the projectiles embedding themselves into the tree and ground around her with a series of thuds, while the spike burst into a shower of ice.

Taking a deep breath, Sloane peered around the tree, assessing the situation.

Stefan and Nemura were locked in combat with the cultists, their weapons a blur as they fought back-to-back and despite the odds, they held their ground, their movements synchronized in a deadly dance as they moved between the trees fighting groups of three or four at a time.

Seeing an opportunity, Sloane stepped out from behind the tree, her hand clutching a **[Flashbang]**, with a swift, underhand toss, she threw the device into the midst of the cultists.

A man rushed to kick it away, but it detonated just before he reached it with a loud crack, a blinding flash of light filling the area.

Cries of surprise and disorientation echoed from the cultists as they were momentarily blinded.

Sloane used the confusion to search for the ice mage, seeing him just as he was in the midst of conjuring another glacial spike, his hands in front of him as he drew upon his magic to form a massive missile made from ice.

She formed several **[Mana Bolts]** to disrupt his cast, however, before she could unleash them, a pair of arcane energy beams abruptly pierced the man from behind—continuing on into another unsuspecting cultist in front of him.

The mage choked out a gasp, his spell misfiring.

Rather than hurtling toward Sloane and her allies, the ice spike veered off course, barreling into the mage's own comrades.

The cultists had no chance to evade as the spike crashed into them, decimating at least four individuals on impact including one of the shield mages, his protective barrier collapsing with his death.

A stunned silence fell over the battlefield as the cultists processed the havoc wrought by one of their own.

A rush surged through Sloane energizing her, and she didn't squander the moment.

She cast another [Arcane Mortar] toward the back of the enemy force and this time, it wasn't intercepted.

As the spell exploded, essentially disintegrating the backline, the cultists broke.

In the midst of the chaos, Vesper was a whirlwind of destruction.

The golem darted amongst the dazed and confused cultists, her form intermittently visible as she struck out with her [Arcane Lances] and claws.

Her attacks were precise and lethal, sowing further disarray amongst the cultists' ranks.

It wasn't long later that the fighting was over.

Nemura and Stefan stood panting heavily, their chests heaving as they struggled to catch their breath. Sweat dripped from their brows, and their faces flushed from the exertion. Sloane made her way towards them, her gaze falling on Vesper as the golem returned to her side.

In Vesper's mouth was a strange device, which she dropped into Sloane's outstretched hand—an odd-looking object, reminiscent of a—she blushed.

This straight up looks like a massaging wand.

The handle was inscribed with crude runes, and a yellow core, roughly the size of a baseball, was affixed to one end.

Sloane turned the device over in her hands, her brow furrowed in thought. As she studied it, Nemura's voice broke through her concentration.

"The others are here," the guardswoman announced, her gaze fixed on a point behind Sloane.

Turning, Sloane saw the rest of their group approaching.

Their faces were a mix of shock and awe as they took in the aftermath of the battle. The once peaceful forest clearing was now a battlefield, littered with the bodies of the fallen cultists.

Tucking the tracker into her satchel, Sloane quickly moved to retrieve her spent grenades before turning back to the group. "Let's go," she said, her voice steady.

There was no time to waste and they needed to take advantage of the opening that *hopefully* the lack of a tracker would give them.



The group was inching closer to their goal, the spot where they were supposed to meet the smuggler. The Estos agent estimated that within another bell or two, they'd finally be there.

The day had worn on since they broke through the cultist group, the red sun now dropping closer to the horizon and casting exaggerated, long shadows that danced across the terrain while the sky wore a captivating blend of orange and pink like a soft blanket as it transitioned to evening.

Tiredness was their constant companion, and Sloane felt it cling to her almost as tightly as her own skin. She knew, without needing to ask, that her companions were in the same boat.

Yet, the weariness didn't stop them.

The need to reach their destination urged them forward, driving them to push through the fatigue, to place one foot in front of the other as they kept moving.

Given their circumstances, Mariel was faring remarkably well. She had managed to find a perch on Nemura's back, riding piggyback-style as she dozed off, her head resting on the sturdy shoulder of the telv woman.

Sloane glanced over at them, feeling her brows knit together as she felt a pang of concern for her guard.

"Nemura, you holding up okay?" Sloane questioned, her voice kept at a low murmur.

The response came as a quiet chuckle from Nemura, a light, almost mirthful sound that felt oddly out of place amidst their trials. "This little one's no heavier than my shield," she replied, her voice laced with a soft warmth that spoke volumes.

Sloane offered to transfer Mariel onto Vesper's back, but Nemura dismissed the idea with a firm shake of her head. "Vesper needs to stay battle-ready. Don't worry. I can handle the pipsqueak."

Sloane acknowledged her point with a nod, respecting Nemura's judgment.

They resumed their journey, the encircling forest growing increasingly dim as the sun dipped ever lower. Roughly half an hour later, Tiberius signaled to Sloane about riders coming their way along the road just up ahead.

Reacting swiftly, the group concealed themselves, Sloane held her breath as she hunkered down behind a tree while the others sought their own hiding places.

However, in a moment of unfortunate clumsiness, Toren stumbled and fell and his gear rattled noisily to the ground, echoing loudly in the quiet surroundings.

Everyone froze.

The riders halted, their attention veering toward the source of the unexpected clatter. Despite the mishap, Sloane and the others maintained their silence, holding on to the slim hope that the riders would overlook the noise.

Almost ten nerve-wracking minutes ticked by, with each second stretching out as they anticipated the riders' reaction while the men stopped and spoke quietly to each other. Sloane noticed Nemura's hand moving toward her sword, but she stopped after a quick shake of the head from Yemina.

Much to Sloane's relief, the riders seemed to disregard the earlier sound, finally spurring their horses onward and disappearing down the road. The group exhaled in unison, the tension easing off their shoulders as they recognized their narrow escape.

Yemina signaled the group to resume their journey, her silent command sending them back on their way. Sloane found herself hyper-aware of every footfall, the crunch of leaves and snap of twigs beneath her boots sounding alarmingly loud in her own ears.

Caution was the name of the game from here on out.

Another fifteen minutes trickled by before Tiberius sent a warning signal to Sloane once more. She looked at her watch, a sinking feeling settling in her gut as she realized that the riders were tailing them and then, not terribly further from them were the other groups of cultists. Their delay allowing two groups to near them, luckily they no longer knew *exactly* where they were.

"We're being followed," she announced in a low but urgent tone. "The riders circled back and are not far behind us. If we get delayed again, the other groups will catch up as well, they're swinging back vaguely this way."

The moon elf agent from House Estos scanned the path they'd come from, his face pensive. Finally, he shook his head. "We should hurry to the meeting point and leave as quickly as possible," he advised.

Nemura agreed, shifting Mariel's weight on her back. "I agree. We should keep going."

"Put Mariel on Vesper's back," Sloane instructed. "If we need to move quickly, that will be for the best."

The telv woman complied, gently waking Mariel in the process who mumbled and clutched to the golem tightly as they prepared to move again.

With a heightened sense of urgency, they increased their speed, hearts thumping wildly in their chests as they plowed through the forest undergrowth. Suddenly, the dense trees gave way to open space, revealing a serene bay with an anchored ship.

A couple of smaller boats were being held close along the rocky shore, their hulls bobbing gently with the rhythm of the lapping waves while men stood waiting.

But as they drew closer to the boats, a shout echoed from the direction they had come from. The unmistakable thud of hooves on the forest floor filled the air, and a man's voice bellowed, ordering them to stop.

“Get you and your people to the boats, Ilian, Toren! Now!” Sloane commanded, spinning around to confront the emerging threat. She looked down at her golem, seeing Mariel awake with wide eyes as she looked at the approaching riders. “Vesper, take her. Get to the boats.”

As her golem rushed the girl to safety, Yemina fell into step beside her, drawing her sword with a determined grimace.

Once again, the commanding voice rang out, demanding them to halt. Hefting her weapon, Yemina raised her voice, a steely undertone to her words. “Stand down!” she warned. “We are departing, but we will defend ourselves if needed.”

Surprisingly, the man pulled at the reins of his horse, bringing it to a stop.

There was a pause—a heavy, silent moment that hung in the air like a shroud. Yemina repeated her command, her tone more assertive, as if punctuating the threat with her firm resolution.

After a tense moment, the man slowly removed his helmet, revealing the age-creased face of a sun elf beneath. His voice held a tinge of recognition, “Evocati Yemina?”

Yemina stood as if struck by lightning, her body rigid.

Seeing the shock on the woman's face, Sloane shot out a question, her voice cutting through the tense silence. “Who are you?”

But Yemina answered for him, a note of disbelief seeping into her voice. “Praetor Moren? But... What? I thought you died,” she confessed, removing her own helmet and passing it to Nemura.

The elder sun elf exhaled deeply and dismounted his horse, his tone filled with a grim resolve. “We had to go underground, Yemina. The Children of Tenera have usurped control over this entire region from the Church. They've slaughtered every paladin... every priest and priestess

that have not joined them... only we remain. With the war raging, I haven't managed to get a message to Dawn's Rise. I... I believed you were killed in the Swanbrook Temple fire."

Shaking her head, Yemina interjected, "I was ambushed before that... I barely survived. Vicori Fynn is dead."

He nodded somberly. "I heard." His gaze then shifted to Sloane. "You must be Baroness Sloane Reinhart. I'm sorry you got caught in the middle of all of this, but I'm glad we were able to find you."

Sloane almost replied, but Moren's attention had already returned to Yemina. "Come, Evocati. It's a relief to see you alive and well."

Wait. My hood is up, and it's dark.

Something bothered Sloane though. She glanced at Nemura and saw the conflict that was etched on her face. Sloane turned back to the man as Yemina stepped forward, but Sloane reached forward and grabbed the paladin's arm, holding her back. "Why are all of you here?" she asked the man.

The man tilted his head as he examined her as if for the first time. "We were returning to Swanbrook," he replied simply before turning back to Yemina. "We have been fighting back against the cultists and need supplies."

They didn't seem surprised at all to see us. Just Yemina.

Sloane narrowed her eyes and turned to Yemina. "I don't like this, Yemina," she said in a low voice so that the riders wouldn't hear. "Something's off."

The paladin jerked her arm away as if Sloane's touch had hurt her. "My brethren in Alos would never betray His light."

Nemura shook her head though. "I agree with Sloane, Yemina. This is too convenient."

"I thought *he* was dead," Yemina hissed quietly. "Why can't you see? This is the break we've needed. The Praetor will help lead the fight against the cultists."

Sloane shared a look with Nemura as the paladin walked away. She wasn't sure what, but something was wrong and she hoped against everything that Yemina was correct.

Praetor Moren stretched his arms out in an invitation for an embrace, and Yemina moved into it, her shoulders visibly relaxing as the two of them spoke softly enough that Sloane couldn't hear.

How did he know who I am?

Her eyes widened. “Yemina? Come here, now,” she called out. At her side, Nemura’s hand went to her sword’s hilt.

While the other riders focused on Sloane, Praetor Moren leaned in to whisper something into Yemina’s ear.

Suddenly, Yemina jerked back, her eyes wide as she looked up at him. “What have you done?” Her tone was aghast, horrified. She hesitated for only a moment more before she swung a fist at him.

The man, however, was quicker. As he deftly sidestepped her attack with a fluid and precise movement. In a swift motion, he spun her around and wrapped an arm around her neck, effectively immobilizing her. Yemina struggled, but his grip was like iron as he whispered to the woman with narrowed eyes.

Ignoring the man, Yemina locked eyes with Stefan and managed to gasp out, “Get to Dawn’s Rise.” Her words were punctuated by a grimace of pain, but her gaze never wavered from Stefan’s.

Moren let out a sigh, a sound heavy with regret and a sense of inevitability. His grip on her loosened slightly, and in the next instant, a blade of pure darkness erupted from Yemina’s chest.

A gasp tore itself from Yemina’s lips, a sound of pain and surprise that cut through the tense air as the blade, seemingly crafted from the very essence of shadow, pierced through her with a violent force.

“Yemina!” The shout came from Stefan, his voice filled with a mix of shock and fear as he drew his blades and took several steps forward, his eyes darting around as he sought options.

Her body stiffened, leaving her gasping for breath as shock painted her features against the sudden, brutal assault before her strength ebbed, and she began to fold. Swaying, she tried to draw a blade, but the man clamped a hand over hers and held it back.

Yemina tried to jerk away from the man but then the blade-like spell extinguished and her knees buckled beneath her, the paladin’s strong figure crumpling like a marionette whose strings had been abruptly cut.

Driven by a sudden adrenaline rush, Sloane began to channel her mana. Her focus centered, her intent taking shape within her core as she cast an **[Arcane Lance]**.

As she released the spell, a dazzling beam of pure arcane energy surged forth, however, another of the riders acted swiftly, his own spell forming a translucent circular shield of energy in the air.

The [Arcane Lance] collided with the magical barrier, burning for a drawn-out two seconds that seemed to last an eternity. Instead of piercing through, the beam of arcane energy pulsed against the shield, weakening it before finally bursting through, but not before providing a crucial window of opportunity for Moren and his men to evade the direct line of attack.

She fired a series of [Mana Bolts] that hit either shield or the ground, sending clouds of dirt into the air around them.

As the dust began to settle, the traitorous paladin's voice cut through the lingering tension, a clear demand shaping his words. "Surrender the Avatar!" His command echoed around the rapidly darkening clearing.

Almost simultaneously, the sound of additional reinforcements approaching began to swell, filling the space with the ominous resonance of impending conflict. Sloane felt a sense of dread creeping up her spine just as Nemura seized her arm, an urgent command ringing out over the growing chaos. "We have to go. Now!"

"We have to get to her!" Sloane argued, but just as her words ended, more figures began to emerge from the shadowy tree line, tens and then scores of armed cultists formed up and approached Praetor Moren and the riders.

"We can't fight that, Sloane!" Stefan said urgently.

In response, Sloane gritted her teeth and conjured an [Arcane Mortar], hurling it directly at Moren.

The man, quick on his feet, dove to the side just as two magical shields appeared in front of him just as the spell exploded and deflected the blast away from them.

She observed Yemina's crumpled form for any sign of movement, and when none came, Sloane pivoted and sprinted toward the boats with Stefan and Nemura hot on her heels.

Out in the water, one of the boats had already started moving, Ilian and Toren visible in the faint glow of twilight.

The sailors in the remaining boat waved at them frantically, their eyes wide with fear, urging them on.

As they darted toward the safety of the boat, Sloane continually sent out [Mana Bolts], her magical projectiles raining down on the line of emerging cultists.

As they neared, twin beams of [Arcane Lances] streaked towards the cultists, courtesy of Vesper.

"Sloane, look out!" Nemura's alarmed shout made Sloane snap her gaze behind them.

Time seemed to slow down as she saw a spear of pure darkness hurtling toward her. But just as she braced for impact, a heart-stopping screech filled the air and Tiberius appeared from nowhere in front of her, taking the full brunt of the dark spear.

The spell detonated in a cloud of pitch-black mana, and Tiberius let out a cry that sounded almost pained as his metallic form tumbled to the ground.

Ignoring the pandemonium around her, Sloane rushed forward and scooped up the battered golem, and with Tiberius secured in her arms, sprinted the remaining distance to the boat.

No sooner had she jumped in, she started raining down [**Arcane Mortars**] on the cultists, covering their escape as the sailors urgently pushed off, rowing as fast as they could to distance themselves from the treacherous shore.

As they retreated from the shoreline, both Sloane and Vesper were relentless in their defensive assault, casting spells into the receding distance. The cultists retaliated, their dark magic streaking towards the fleeing boat, but they failed to find their mark.

The distance between the boat and the shore steadily increased until they were safely out of range.

Before long, they reached the anchored ship and as Sloane hauled herself aboard, her eyes immediately landed on Ilian and Toren.

The two men were engrossed in conversation with a man who was adorned in finer clothes than the rest of the crew—clearly the captain and smuggler.

Meanwhile, young Mariel was by the railing of the ship, her gaze fixed on the distant shoreline. Tears streaked down her face, each droplet an echo of the trauma they'd just endured.

Sloane followed her gaze back to the receding shoreline just as the captain's call for setting sail rang out.

A harsh reality sunk in—Yemina had died, and anyone else who might have stood against the cultists was gone.

She extended an arm toward Mariel, inviting the young girl to her side. As Mariel moved closer, wrapping thin arms around her, the raithe priestess-in-waiting looked up at Sloane, her tear-streaked face a reflection of her fear and confusion. “What's going to happen now? Yemina was supposed to get help.”

Drawing a deep breath, Sloane wrapped her arm around Mariel and pulled her into a comforting embrace. “Now, we get you to Rosale, and then we find whoever we need to speak with. They must be warned about what happened here.”

Mariel wiped her nose, her questions pouring out. “Why did he betray her? Why did he betray the Church? Why are they after me? Why would the Family or Tenera let this happen?”

Sloane shook her head, the weight of Mariel's questions hanging heavy in the air. “I don't know, Mariel. But I promise you, I am going to keep you safe.”

As the shoreline faded into the distance, Stefan and Nemura joined them, standing beside them in silent solidarity. They all stared out at the receding landscape as the last remnants of daylight disappeared, surrendering the sky and their spirits to the encroaching darkness of the night.