Whenever Mirajane would look around the guild, she’d feel a sense of peace and completeness. Natsu and Gray getting into another fight, Elfman’s shouting about being a man much to Evergreen’s annoyed admonishments (and loving gazes), Lucy and Levy talking about books at the corner of the counter, and one or other fight breaking out throughout the guild. This rowdy bunch of loudmouths and their antics made her feel like everything was alright in the world, that things made sense, that everything was… normal.

It was hard to feel normal these days.

With all the close brushes with death, all the battles and villains and monsters who sought to end their lives, one would think she’d have gotten used to putting her life on the line. That coming out on top, alive, meant that you won and things would just be back to the way they were. But she knew the truth, truthfully Mirajane suspected everyone knew better, but they all just preferred to keep those thoughts to themselves, it was no use bringing up the past. Fairy Tail was all about moving forward after all.

A war changes people after all.

The scars remained. The war with Alvarez, Acnologia, the near end of the world…

Had it only been half a year? Sometimes it felt like it was a lifetime ago.

Mirajane sighed, pushing those thoughts away and serving the apple juice to her favorite Dragon Slayer. “Here you go, Wendy!”

“Um…” The blue-haired girl muttered, looking down at her drink. “That’s not my cider, Mirajane”

The eldest Strauss looked at her scandalized, “Wendy, you’re too young for that!”

“…Not really” It was then that Mirajane took notice that Wendy’s voice wasn’t the soft high-pitched tone she remembered. It hadn’t been for a decade.

The nostalgia goggles were lifted from her eyes and she was forced to *really* look at the twenty-one-year-old young woman, who looked at her with confusion and a very small hint of annoyance. Gods, so many things they missed in seven years, including watching Wendy grow up…

“…Oh” Mirajane muttered apologetically, taking the glass away and giving the girl… the woman the drink she had ordered. “Sorry, I guess I still see you as that little girl sometimes”

Wendy sighed, grabbing her glass and looking sadly into it. “Everyone does…” She muttered.

Mirajane didn’t need dragon senses to hear that. Wendy was still going through stuff after the war, her own feelings of inadequacy and having to support the guild while everyone else was gone for years wore on her. Mirajane missed that awkward little girl… but perhaps that was the problem, perhaps everyone was still treating her as their little sister. She decided the best way to avoid upsetting her further was to go the other way and keep herself busy.

She quickly prepared the next order with a skill born from experience. The right mixture of liquor and fruit juice for Lucy and Levy’s drinks, along with a bag of chips she pulled from under the counter.

“Thanks Mira,” The two said almost in unison. Heh, always in sync those two. Before they got back to talking. “So yeah, just got her last letter. She says she’s doing fine, not to worry, but feels she’ll be away longer because she’s hit a wall”

“Didn’t the last one say that too?” Levy muttered worriedly.

“Yeah,” Lucy sighed, taking a sip of her drink.

And there was the *other* issue that kept Mirajane feeling restless. Erza… or rather, her absence.

Two months ago, the Scarlet had left on a training journey. Claiming she needed to come to terms with some things and improve on her own. She was adamant that she’d be alone for the time being, and… well, considering the circumstances, nobody was going to argue against her wishes.

Not after they learned about Irene.

Her team felt her absence the most, but really, everyone in the Guild missed her. Erza was always a cornerstone of their little family, a rock to rely on, a pillar to support them. And damn it, Mirajane missed her friend dearly…

But no, she had to go on her own for this, not even telling them what type of training she was doing, or what her goal was.

“You’d think by now she’d have learned to open up…” Mirajane muttered, feeling a small amount of anger towards the Titania. She realized too late she said it out loud.

“You know how she is, Mira,” Lucy said, her gaze conflicted. “Look I want her here too, or at least I’d have liked for her to let us help train, or… told us what’s bothering her”

“I think we all know what’s bothering her,” Levy said distantly.

“…Yeah” Lucy merely replied, clearly very knowledgeable on what *it* was.

“She shouldn’t deal with this alone,” Mirajane replied. “She’s the first to tell people that, and yet she does this. That thick-headed… Ung!” The white-haired young woman chose to swallow her mounting anger.

“Well we didn’t really fight her on it,” Lucy pointed out.

“She needed space,” Levy countered, “And we gave it to her”

“I think it’s enough space for now,” Mirajane said, resting her hands on the counter. “Someone needs to go there and check on her. *Talk to her*”

Lucy took a deep breath, “You’re right. I think it’s time we get the team to check on her”

“There’s been that influx of jobs though,” Levy pointed out much to their chagrin, and she clearly wasn’t happy with it either. “Master said it’ll be all hands on deck for the next few weeks”

Recovering economically after a war was difficult. Doubly so for a country. *Everyone* needed help with something. Monsters and bandits ran rampant these days…

Mirajane bit her cheek, “…I could go check on her” She said, much to the others’ surprise. “You know my work here is to ‘hold the fort’ more often than not, I think the Master could spare me”

“You’d do that?” Lucy asked, looking hopeful.

“Of course!” Mirajane nodded, smiling brightly. “Trust me, I’ve known her longer than you, I know how to get through that thick head of hers”

She hoped…

X~X~X~X~X

Thankfully Master Makarov was understanding and granted her leave to go look for their favorite redhead. With a sufficiently filled backpack, she bid her goodbyes to the guild as everyone would soon be very busy, hugging her siblings and her closest friends tightly, promising to come back with Erza in tow.

Erza was quite a way from Magnolia, but thankfully she had given them the general location of her current stay in her letters. Creek Renatus was a quiet place up near the mountains in the Fiore countryside, a relatively peaceful area surrounded by forests around the titular creek, with its crystal-clear waters gently coursing through the terrain.

If Mirajane knew Erza (and she prided herself in knowing the Scarlet far better than she knew herself), then she’d most likely be staying by the river as it’d provide a good source of clean water. But to find her in the middle of all these woods she’d had to get a bird’s eye view of the whole place.

Thankfully her magic came in handy, as she summoned a pair of bat-like wings from her back and took to the skies, placing herself high enough for the most optimal vantage point. She flew following the river’s path, looking for any signs of the Titania. Perhaps smoke from a campfire or a signature of Erza’s magic.

Fortunately, Mirajane spotted a small clearing near the riverbank, and there caught sight of a smudge of red. Excitement and joy bloomed in her heart and quickly dove towards the ground.

As she drew near, she began making out the details more clearly. Erza was sitting cross-legged on the ground in a meditative position, wearing her Clear Heart, and looking very at peace with herself and her surroundings… from a distance, the closer she got the more notable to Mirajane was the stern frown on her face. Though admittedly that wasn’t an unusual gesture for Erza.

The moment the sound of her wings beating reached the redhead, Erza reacted with surprise, dropping her meditation and looking straight at the eldest Strauss. “Mirajane?” She muttered, clearly she hadn’t expected to see her.

Mirajane landed nearby with a wide smile, her wings disappearing into motes of magic. “Been a while, Erza”

The knight merely stared at her moment, her shocked expression slowly morphing into joy. “It’s so good to see you”

“If that’s the case,” Mirajane held out her arms, “Where is my hug?” She asked, tilting her head cutely to the side.

Erza chuckled to herself, rising from her position to embrace her best friend. The two shared a heartful hug, happy to see each other after all this time. After a moment or two, they split up, but Erza still held her hands over Mirajane’s shoulders. “I wasn’t expecting to see you,” Or anyone, Mirajane figured that was left unsaid.

“Well, somebody had to check up on you eventually,” Mirajane said, trying not to sound too judgmental. “It’s been months, Erza. We were starting to get worried”

Erza let go of her shoulders, “I was sending letters, wasn’t I?”

“It’s not the same as actually seeing you ourselves,” Mirajane said, this time being a *little bit more* judgmental, using her best big sister glare to get the point across. “We barely even know what you were doing”

Erza opened her mouth, but her argument degraded into sigh, “I suppose I should have been more open but… I wasn’t comfortable sharing it then”

Mirajane’s glare disappeared, replaced by a sympathetic gaze. “If you’re still not comfortable...”

“No, I… I mean, I don’t think I am. But maybe talking about it would do me better, think I’ve carried this on my own long enough” She turned around, motioning for Mirajane to follow her. “Come on, let’s talk somewhere more comfortable”

Mirajane followed suit, and after a short walk, she deadpanned at the sight of this ‘comfortable’ place Erza mentioned. “It’s a cave,”

“Home sweet home”

“Erza you’ve been living in a cave?”

“It’s roomy, and hey I made sure to make it homey while training here”

Mirajane just sighed and entered the cave with her friend. To Erza’s credit the place was roomy, a large natural earthen formation with almost no humidity, and despite being, you know, made of dirt and rocks it didn’t look *unclean*. The further they went in the more Mirajane could see those ‘roomy’ aspects. Namely, a bed made out of a large futon and fur covers, a basin with clean water, a portable electric stove, and several pans and plates tucked away in a container to be kept clean.

The detail that made Mirajane smile was the various pictures Erza kept around of the guild.

“Well, you sure packed more than essential” She noted, putting her backpack down and sitting on a foldable chair.

“To be perfectly honest, I don’t really pack. Ever” Erza pointed out, “I just… summon what I need from my storage” She explained as she sat on another chair opposite of Mirajane.

“Huh, never really thought you stored more than weapons and armor with your magic,”

“It’s very useful. I even have a mobile bathroom” The redhead said rather proudly.

“Wait you do? Erza where do you get the money for all that?”

“Missions of course,”

“You and your team have to pay for everything you break when you go out. I think the Master is still alive just so he can keep screaming at you”

“Unlike Natsu and Gray, I do know how to save”

“Fair enough,” Well, Mirajane deemed that was enough banter, “Now… Erza, will you tell me what you’ve been doing here”

Erza’s lips pursed in hesitation, she opened and closed her mouth a few times, trying to formulate the words. Mirajane did not push her, she gave her all the time she needed.

“I suppose… it has to do with my… with Irene”

Mirajane’s eyes widened, her back straightening at the mention of *that* woman. Gods even today the memory of that *sheer power* was haunting…