

All Good Things Come to an End

By the time the knights returned from their rooms, Sloane had nearly finished nursing her ale. It was not that good if she were honest, it was only slightly cooler than room temperature, and was cloudy and thick with dregs that had not yet settled. Essentially, it was almost like a modern British ale. She smirked at her own joke, slightly disappointed no one was around that would understand what it meant.

Ernald looked between her and the mug she was holding, “Already starting are we? How rude!” he jested with a tone that held no seriousness.

Maud looked at him as she moved to sit on the inside next to Sloane, “Ernald, if anyone here deserves a drink, it’s her. You could probably do without one.”

Ernald faked an injury to his chest, “You wound me Ser Maud, and here I thought you were on my side.”

Deryk smirked, “Ernald, come now if it weren’t for your mind, I’m not quite sure anyone would stand your tongue to be on any side but the back one.”

That got everyone laughing, and the others decided they wanted to join in on the fun. Walking up, Cristole smacked Ernald’s back then laid a hand on his shoulder, “Ah, lay off of him everyone. We all know each traveling troupe needs a jester!” He shook him a little adding, “I certainly appreciate your quick wit and sharp tongue Ernald. Don’t let these uncultured sots bring you down!”

Ismeld raised an imaginary mug as she reached the table, “Hear hear!”

Sloane got a bit confused, “Wait, I thought you all were going to come down here *before* Ismeld and Cristole got ready.”

Maud looked embarrassed, “That would be my fault. I changed the plan as we got upstairs. Wanted to make sure they had help if needed, but at least you managed to get an ale! And for free it seems! Right?”

Sloane rolled her eyes, “Yeah, the server was nice and took pity upon me.” She smiled, “But hey, at least you are all here now. Let’s eat!”

Everyone settled into a light conversation as a group or each other as they ordered their drinks and food. Finally, Jahqin brought their food to the table on platters so that everyone could grab them off and share. A selection of roast meat, bread, cheese, and some fruits she couldn’t quite identify was spread in front of her. They all took their time to eat, polite conversation springing up. Deryk looked over to her from the other end of the table, “Lady Sloane, how does a normal dinner from your world compare to this?”

Sloane thought for a second, “Honestly? It’s not vastly different. We usually eat a type of meat, a starch—that is, a potato, pasta, or rice—, and some vegetables as the main course. The biggest difference is the way our food is prepared and stored. We also use more spices as they are more commonplace, simply because we shifted from a local economy to a national and global one where we could affordably get produce or other food products from even other nations without spoilage.” Sloane finished her short description and looked at the blank stares, blinking, she added “I guess that wasn’t as extensive of an answer as you wanted?”

The group laughed, and Deryk responded, “No! It was fine, I didn’t expect you to give more than a passing answer. Thank you.”

Cristole looked around and then spoke up, “Actually, there was something I wanted to ask everyone. When I killed that wolf, I felt something. Almost a rush through me, invigorating me. I thought it was just because I had managed to fell the beast but that feeling hasn’t gone away.” He formed a fist and looked down at it, “I feel a bit stronger and better than I have in a while.”

Ismeld looked up from the food she had been focused on. “You too? I had thought it strange but thought it was just me. It reminded me of the feeling of a burst of heat that rushes out at you when you throw alcohol onto a fire. I thought it was just the thrill of combat, my arms prickling in anticipatory glee at the fight.”

Sloane looked at Ismeld, taking in her look fully for the first time. She looked about Sloane’s own mid-thirties age but had a weary, serious look from constant martial training and fighting. She was tall like Sloane, though a hair shorter, but with the build of an MMA fighter. Ismeld had neat, shoulder-length blonde hair that framed her angular jawline and slightly pointed chin. Her, frankly ridiculously, perfect eyebrows seemingly had a requirement where

one must be raised at all times. Her narrow, golden eyes assessed the room, constantly on alert for any threats. Sloane thought she seemed as if she had a chip on her shoulder, almost as if she were honor-bound to prove herself. There was likely more there, and perhaps Sloane would be able to get the woman to warm up to her.

Sloane contemplated what was being said, did she feel something after killing the wolf? She had originally attributed it to an adrenaline rush, her body reacting to a highly tense moment. Now having time to think about it, she realized that the feeling hadn't really gone away. She wasn't on edge anymore, she didn't feel anxious. She just felt a little bit stronger. After adding her thoughts to the conversation, she noticed something and spoke up, "was it only those that killed a wolf that felt this?"

Everyone looked around, Maud spoke up, "I didn't feel anything like that, although when I healed Ernard "she nodded toward him, "I felt a rush through my hands."

Sloane looked over at Deryk who had also not landed the killing blow on one. "Ser Deryk, what about you? Did you feel anything?"

He slowly shook his head, "No, I did not. You think it is because everyone else managed to land the final strike to fell the beasts?"

"I think so. I have a theory, but I would prefer to not mention it yet until I have formulated my thoughts. We will need to do some tests after we leave Valesbeck. That is if you are all amenable to such a thing."

Sloane smiled as she took in all of the nods, "So, Ser Gisele with that said, I believe you stated we would come up with a plan of action once we arrived at the tavern?"

Gisele looked over to Ser Cristole, then to Sloane. "Yes, I think I have an idea of where to start. Realistically, we cannot search the entire land, so what we needed to do is try and hit all the villages on the way to Thirdghyll, inquiring about Gwyn in each of them. Thirdghyll has a smaller branch of the Westaren Royal Academy and is the primary place of learning for this region of the kingdom. Also, many travel there from the local Sovereign Cities, such as Goosebourne, Swanbrook, and Marketbol. What is little known, is that the Academy is also the headquarters for the Westaren Order of Secrets. The group is tasked with maintaining both general news and secrets of all potential threats to the kingdom—which they interpret as any nation or city that isn't Westaren. If anyone knows anything, it will be them."

The others nodded, Sloane slowly understanding the thought process of the Knights that pledged to support her. “So, you will take me to this order, and vouch for me to them in hopes that they have information regarding my daughter? Is that where we will part ways? Not to sound unappreciative, because I really am, but what if they don’t know?”

Ser Gisele got a solemn look on her face, “Sloane—” She paused to take a breath, “Sloane, the travel from here to Thirdghyll will take some time. Especially, if we have to encounter more enraged beasts and stop at all the villages we can along the route...”

She hesitated, and Ser Ismeld stepped in for her, “What Ser Gisele is saying is that we may need to accept that if there is no news at that point, either your daughter did not arrive with you, or something occurred. Your daughter is young, so many things could have—“

“No, my daughter is alive. I know it, I will find her. I will appreciate your aid in traveling to this city of secrets you spoke of. If we must part at that point, just know that I am grateful for the assistance you have given me.” Sloane pushed back from the table and stood, holding back tears of frustration. She looked over the group one last time, “Now if you excuse me, I believe I am going to go rest for the evening.” She turned and walked away.

She heard Maud sternly speak to the others as Sloane stepped away, “Great job everyone. Really, good job. The woman may have lost her daughter and you threaten to strip away the only hope she has?”

Sloane paused by the stairs, out of sight from the others. She heard Cristole speak up, “Maud, it is highly unlikely her daughter has survived if she arrived away from any village or town. If there is no news by the time we arrive and inquire at Thirdghyll, or the *City of Secrets*, as Sloane called it. I fear the worst.”

She was just about to rush upstairs, when Deryk spoke up, “What if her daughter simply arrived further away? Perhaps not even in Westaren?”

Sloane’s eyes widened, *why hadn’t she thought of that?* She leaned against the wall and listened for a response, which Ser Gisele gave, “That’s certainly possible Deryk, but if Gwyn did arrive elsewhere, how will we find her? Will we escort her around the entire western half of the continent? What of the rest? At what point do we stop Deryk? Maud?”

“Until our conscience is clear. Sloane saved your life Ernald, would you give up so soon to help her after that?” Maud shifted tactics.

“Maud, I am deeply grateful for what she did for me, really. I...” Ernald trailed off. Just when Sloane thought the conversation was done and about to head upstairs, he continued. “I would be agreeable to escorting her to a port after Thirdghyll, possibly Swanbrook. This would allow her to chart a ship to Avira. The Academy there has some of the greatest minds anywhere in the region. Maud, you used actual magic to heal me. If anyone understands what is going on since the blue flash, it will be them.”

“So, Swanbrook. We will help her chart a ship to Maireharbora in Avira. Then we will part ways with her.” Ser Gisele

The conversation ended from there and Sloane walked up to her room. Entering, she took in the quaint room. A small single framed bed with a trunk that was surprisingly decorated was placed in front of it. A small desk with a stool on the side, decorated with a small vase filled with flowers and an oil lamp providing lighting. A small water basin was set up on a table in the corner next to the door. She took off her shoes and sat on the bed, considering *her* course of action for a moment. She needed an edge. *Edge.* She got an idea and stood back up then started taking off the sword and sheath the knights had given her, placing it on the trunk. Ernald had also given her a knife after the wolf attack on the way to Valesbeck. She removed that from where she had strapped its sheath to her right shin. Pulling the blade out, Sloane looked over it while considering its edge.

Nodding, she sat at the desk, set the knife to the side, and pulled off her watch. Finally getting a chance to closely examine it, she noticed the changes that had occurred. For one, the watch’s plastic was much stronger. Almost like a type of metal, but not quite like the stainless steel the end product would have been. She wasn’t exactly sure what it was made of now, but it definitely wasn’t the same material the test device had been. The watch face seemed to have changed too. Before, it was a strong glass like the type utilized for smartphones. Tapping on it with her fingernail, she tried to get a sense of what it was.

She tapped some more, then had a thought. She walked over to the water basin and dipped her finger into it then let a small drop fall onto the screen. She watched as the water remained in a drop shape, signifying that it was likely a type of crystal glass instead of mineral-based like originally.

She felt along the edge at the seam, it was a tight fit but thought that the face was removable. She grabbed the knife and carefully used the edge to pry the watch apart at the seam, wishing she could use a heat gun, suction cup, and pick to not chance damaging anything. She slowly pulled off the face, not seeing the cable connections she had been expecting, but looked at where the battery should be. Instead of the tiny lithium battery she expected, she saw what looked like a small rectangle of crystal glowing in a swirling purple color. She gently removed the crystal where it was inlaid and looked below. Realized that, in fact, everything inside was different than she had expected.

Instead of a motherboard embedded with various processors, modules, and sensors, she saw what looked like a central gem where the processor would be, followed by a few others in key locations. The ones that stood out were the diamonds, rubies, and sapphires. *Oh, one looks like an emerald too.* There was some type of glowing metallic substance that formed pathways connecting the gems. She could see small engravings along both the pathway and the gems themselves. Looking closer, the pathways looked almost like silver, but the glow confused her. The various engravings were precision etched on the surfaces they resided on, and they looked almost like some sort of alphabet. She would need a set of jeweler's loupe glasses to see it clearly and manipulate any tools she would need. Not really knowing what else to do at this point, she carefully put the watch back together.

She thought about the implications of the change, she was starting to think the blue flash was some sort of magic. While it should probably be clear at this point, it was so far beyond any possibility that it was hard to digest. Something definitely happened, and her watch magically changing was the least of her worries. She would figure out how it worked and use that knowledge to whatever benefit she could. Thirdghyll would hopefully have the tools she needed.

She also needed a way to test anything she came up with. If Sloane couldn't find new allies by the time she reached this port city they mentioned, maybe she could convince the knights to stay with her a little longer by making things for them. Sloane thought it was a good plan, and had a greater chance of working than meeting and convincing completely new people to help her find Gwyn.

A plan devised, she figured she would look at making something for Maud first. Maud had already displayed magical ability. Her watch was ostensibly using magic, so maybe the first thing could be something that would enhance that healing magic.

She put her watch back on, blew out the lamp, and then went to lay in the bed. She was thinking about all of the fantasy movies and books she had grown up on. Sloane realized that all of those magical tools, weapons, and items that had appeared fantastical on Earth, now seemed completely within reach.

Just as she was about to sleep there was a knock on the door. She opened it, seeing Jahqin there. “I apologize for the late hour milady, but I have some news. Not exactly what you are hoping for, but it’s not necessarily good nor bad.”

Sloane raised an eyebrow, “What is it Jahqin?”

Looking at her ears, he spoke up. “Frankly, Lady Sloane, it didn’t register earlier, but you’re not a telv are you?”

“No, I’m not. Why?”

“Well, you see, I asked around and the Militia found another person that had ears and a similar complexion as yours. It was a male though, a little taller than you.”

Sloane perked up, “Oh? Another human? Where is he? What did he say?”

Jahqin’s expression turned far more serious than it had all night. “That’s just it, Lady Sloane. He was found dead. He had been killed by the wolves.”