

The Val Forests

In the earliest days after The Flash, mana caused minimal changes to the various fauna. Like all beings, the wildlife of Eona gained a core and access to mana. However, as was later discovered, mana was not spread over the world equally. It pooled in places, and these 'wells' caused numerous mutations within beings local to the areas. This, luckily, predominantly occurred far from civilization as those effects were even more disastrous.¹

The prevalence of the mana wells within the Val Forests is subject to many debates, including how much they contributed to what came later.

¹ Suya, A. (168SA). Ch 4 - Examples within Civilization. In *Mana and its Effects* (pp. 142–168). text, Royal Academy of Avira.

Sloane walked back from doing her business to find Deryk and Ismeld with Cristole at the edge of the forest. She looked around in confusion before walking up to them, stepping over some brush as she exited the tree line. The wagons were in a decidedly different position than when she had just left, too. The remaining knights and her guards were armed and spread out around everything.

“Hey, what’s up? Why’s everyone on edge?”

Cristole continued looking at what was in his hand but Ismeld turned toward her. “*Sloane*, there you are. We called for you, are you okay?” The woman’s face was full of concern.

Sloane tilted her head. “I didn’t hear anyone. I wasn’t that far, I just had to go relieve myself.”

Cristole stood and turned toward her, something that looked like a scale the size of his fist was in his hand. “Did you hear anything at all?”

She shook her head. “No...” She let out a nervous chuckle. “You guys are worrying me. What is wrong?”

“We heard something, it sounded like a large growl coming from the tree line. There was rustling and then it disappeared. I thought I saw something move toward where we saw you last. We yelled, but nothing. We were just about to enter the forest to search for you.”

She squinted her eyes. “Uh... Yeah guys, sorry. I got nothing.”

Cristole looked around. “We should move away from the forest. Come on, back to the wagons.”

Nemura and the knights stepped forward as the four of them walked up. Everyone started talking over each other, starting with Gisele. “You found her. Everything alright?” she said.

“She just came walking out. Didn’t hear anything.”

“Strange.”

“Did you see a place to stop for the night?”

“I’m not sure we should. There’s something out there, and it doesn’t seem small.”

“Lady Sloane didn’t see anything either?”

“She said she didn’t. She also didn’t hear us—”

“I even heard it and we were over here.”

“Guys. I am right here,” Sloane said, starting to get exasperated.

Everyone paused and looked at her. She decided to push some organization into the conversation. “Look. There are way too many people trying to interject in this. Gisele, do you think we should stop for the night? No? Okay. Let’s get moving. If there is something out there, standing here is helping it. Cristole, do you think it’s a big animal or is it a monster? Is it alone?”

He shrugged. “From the size of the scale and the prints I saw, I’d say a monster. I only saw one set of tracks.”

“Good. No one stays alone. Buddy system. Let’s load up and move out. Now.”

Gisele huffed out a laugh and looked around. "Lady Reinhart has spoken. Let's go." The woman waited for Sloane to move closer then leaned over to her as they stepped toward Gisele's horse. "Well done. You're becoming comfortable in your new role in life."

"What's that? Lording over people?"

Gisele shook her head ruefully. "That hits closer to home than you may know. Seriously, thank you for interjecting there."

Sloane nodded. "You're usually the commanding one. Figured you were a good person to emulate."

Gisele smirked but then her eyes narrowed as she looked at something over Sloane's shoulder. "Sloane, do not move."

She felt something crawling on her. "Oh my god, oh my god. What is it?"

Gisele's hand shot forward and she pulled back something that had... *wings*.

Sloane's eyes went wide. "*What is that thing?!*" She screeched.

Gisele raised a brow at her and opened her hand. A small winged reptile rested in her palm. It had no front legs, but it had two little claws on its wings. The thing was staring up at Gisele and shaking slightly. "You don't recognize your cloak's clasp? This is a wynver. They're native to this area. Little guy is probably cold."

"A wynver?" *Sounds awfully similar to a...* She leaned closer and examined the little thing. *Yup, it looks like a palm-sized wyvern.* She then looked down at the clasp on her cloak. "Huh. That's a funny coincidence... He's cute with his little squiggly tail. Do they get bigger?"

"No, this is about as large as they get."

Gisele smiled as she placed the reptile onto the wagon. The tiny wynver crawled closer to the lamp that hung from the corner, trying to feel the heat. The knight then untied the reins of her horse from the side of the wagon.

Hopping on, she pointed down at Sloane. "Let's head out. Keep an eye on that watch. It's saved us more than I care to admit."

“Wrryaat!”

Sloane and Gisele looked up at Tiberius who was perched on the wagon’s roof. “What is it, buddy?”

She used **Golem Sight** and looked around through the falcon’s eyes. In the forest, off in the distance, she noticed movement. Something large and filled with black mana was moving away from them, heading south.

Sloane gasped and let go of the spell. “I saw it. It’s out there deep in the woods and is heading south.”

Tiberius chirped a few times, bouncing as he did.

Gisele glanced between her and Tiberius then sighed. “It seems Tiberius is proving to be a valuable team member. Can you point to where you saw it?”

Sloane scrutinized the tree line, trying to estimate where it was based on where Tiberius had been. When she thought she had it, she indicated at a point slightly southeast of them. “That way.”

Gisele nodded. “Please have Tiberius fly ahead and above us. Can he notify you somehow if he sees something?”

Sloane nodded. “Yes, we figured out a way.”

That way included her watch. She had managed to connect it to Tiberius so that if he noticed something deemed a threat to her, the watch would pulse. She looked at him and gave him the orders Gisele requested. Tiberius chirped as he took off, seemingly understanding the necessity to remain quiet.

“Sloane, get up on the bench. Stay alert. If there is anything big, you’re going to be our heavy hitter.”

* * *

It was several hours later when the caravan had finally found a place to stop for the night. There was a campsite set up on top of a hill with a steep face parallel to the road and the forest beyond. The area was dark with the overcast sky blocking most of the dual moonlight. A fire was lit and the horses were tied close by.

The camp was mostly silent, with everyone drained after the long night on the road. Adaega, the two alchemists, Koren the smith, and Ernald had commandeered the center of the camp. The group spoke quietly as they ate their first warm meal in a day. The rest of the knights and the two Reinhart guards had already set up a schedule to sleep and keep watch so those who needed to rest could do so without feeling like they might miss something. Sloane was relieved that they had finally stopped; she wanted to be somewhere somewhat defensible during the night if there was something out there.

Tiberius occasionally caught sight of the monster in the forest but as the night dragged on, Sloane was finding it more and more difficult to stay awake and Gisele had told her to go to sleep. Still, Sloane made sure Tiberius knew to come back as quickly as possible to warn the knights if the monster moved toward the camp.

Sloane climbed into the wagon and her cot, and she reflected on how poorly the day had gone. *This day really sucked.*

Exhaustion quickly settled in and her thoughts slowly drifted as she felt herself falling asleep.

* * *

Sloane blinked into wakefulness as a small stream of light shone on her face. She let out a yawn and covered her eyes for a moment to adjust to the brightness within the wagon. Sloane turned her head away from the sun laser attempting to burn her eyes out and stretched. After getting up, she looked around and noticed Maud sleeping close by. She *gingerly* stepped over the redhead and made her way out of the wagon.

It was early morning and she was immediately noticed by Nemura who was standing right outside. "Good morning, My Lady. Did you sleep well?"

“I did. Why didn’t anyone wake me? I should have been up just before sunrise, right?”

The muscular telv woman waved her off. “It was nothing. We didn’t see any more signs of whatever was stalking us for the rest of the night.”

Sloane nodded. “That makes sense. Thank you. Have you slept?”

Nemura nodded. “We swapped on and off. I am good.”

“Good. How long until we leave?”

“A couple of hours. Ser Gisele wanted to let everyone eat first,” Nemura said.

“Gisele! Get over here!”

Sloane jerked her head toward the noise. “Was that Cristole?”

Nemura turned as well. “I think so.”

“Let’s go see what’s wrong.”

“Follow behind me please, My Lady. Just in case there is danger.”

Sloane nodded and was content to let the woman do what she knew best and fell in behind her. *Plus, if there really is a system, she’s got to be the tank.*

They made their way to the edge of the camp where Cristole sat on his horse. Gisele and Ismeld stood next to him. Cristole glanced at Nemura and her as they approached, causing the other two to turn and look as well.

“Everything alright, Cristole?” Sloane asked.

“No. There’s something everyone should see,” he said.

“Everyone, everyone? Or just us?”

“I will remain here. Unless it is dangerous?” Ismeld said.

“We will be fine with just the four of us. Ismeld, you may want to wake the others.”

Ismeld looked at Gisele, who gave her a slight nod. “We will return as quickly as possible,” Gisele said.

Cristole got down from his horse and handed the reins to Ismeld. “We won’t need to ride, it’s just up ahead.”

Ismeld led the horse away as the rest of them followed Cristole up the road. Sloane was able to get a good look at her surroundings as they walked. It seemed like they were leaving the rolling plains area that had been all they’d known since leaving Thirdghyll. The fields of grass here were drier, yet the forest to her left was full of greenery and life. It seemed that the road they walked on provided a stark contrast in the environments.

Twenty minutes later, Sloane was wondering why they hadn’t just ridden some horses. “Cristole? Why did we walk? How much further?”

The elf looked at Gisele and they seemed to have an unspoken debate because then Gisele answered for him. “Sloane, you are terrible at riding horses.”

Sloane gasped. “*What?* Et Tu? I fell off... one time.”

Nemura turned and gave her a look. “You do not know how to ride a horse?”

“Look. Riding horses isn’t something most people do often on Earth,” she explained.

Nemura looked confused and opened her mouth to speak, but Cristole cut her off with a raised hand. “Later, please. We are here.”

Sloane looked around and immediately noticed a difference in the area. It was damaged, almost like a tornado had gone through. Trees were broken and leaned on each other. Dirt seemed to be upturned everywhere, and as they walked around the crown of a tree that lay along the side of the road, she saw it.

“What. Is. That?” she asked. *No way. What?*

“*That* is a mutated drakyyd lizard,” Cristole explained.

Nemura narrowed her eyes. “That looks different than the monsters that were in the city. I thought *those* were drakyyds,” she said.

Cristole shrugged, moving to the side as Gisele stepped aside and approached the dead monster. “It is different, but it’s clearly mutated from the same animal.”

Sloane was staring wide-eyed at the beast. “That looks like something we know of in stories on my world.”

That seemed to surprise Cristole slightly. “Really? What do you call them?”

She thought. “It’s called a *drake*, or as many people would know it, a wingless dragon,” she said, still unbelieving what she was looking at. “The closeness of the names is surprising. Oh hey! Just like the *wynver*, Gisele!”

Gisele turned her head and gave Sloane a *look* from where she was examining the thing.

Cristole tilted his head. “Those are small.”

Sloane nodded. “Yeah, just imagine if one of those were as big as this!”

Cristole grimaced and shook his head as if considering the potential. Nemura slowly turned toward Sloane. “You have monsters like this in your stories... *that have wings?*”

Sloane nodded. “Yes, they were bigger too. Many stories had them as sapient and incredibly intelligent. Others simply considered them apex predators. They would—”

“There are piercing wounds all over. The core was cut out as well,” Gisele said from where she was examining the drake.

Sloane lowered her voice. “I can tell you more stories later.”

Nemura just nodded once.

They joined Gisele in examining the wounds. Sloane was a bit squeamish when looking at dead animals, but even she could notice that it had indeed been killed by what seemed like man-made weapons. *Elven made*. The wielders of those weapons, however, were nowhere to be seen.

“Cristole, are you thinking what I am thinking?”

The man nodded and pulled out his sword, looking back toward where they had come from. Gisele also pulled out her side sword, which prompted Nemura to also pull a blade out. The telv spoke up after doing so.

“What are you two thinking? What is it?”

Sloane placed her hand where her sword should have been, and mentally cursed herself after realizing she had left it behind. Compromising, she channeled mana through her and prepared to cast a spell if needed.

“Wryyaaattt! Wrryyatt!”

Sloane heard Tiberius’s cries from behind her and the thwap of a bowstring being released. The three of them quickly turned and Sloane saw an arrow flying toward them. She then saw Tiberius as he swooped down and caught the arrow mid-flight. Sloane followed the trajectory of where the projectile came from and saw five elves. Tiberius snapped the arrow in two and flew down to land on her shoulder.

“Hey, buddy. Good catch. Thank you.”

Tiberius turned his head slightly and chirped at her before turning to focus on the elves.

Gisele must have noticed them as well because her hand shot up and she cast a shield between them and the other group.

Sloane looked at Gisele. *“Who are they?” she said a bit loudly.*

“They’re *Valeni*. The Guardians of the Val Forests. They *hate* outsiders.”

Sloane used **Golem Sight** and looked through Tiberius’ eyes to see the group closer. Immediately she noticed that the five weren’t elves but telv. They wore leather armor, were armed with bows, and wore curved blades on their hips. They were all men, and each had a bow drawn but seemed to be discussing something. *Likely, what to do about us and Gisele’s shield.*

As if summoned by her thoughts, another one drew back his bow and let an arrow fly, hitting the shield dead center to no effect. Nemura looked at where it hit then glanced at Gisele. “Your shield alright, Ser Gisele?”

The orkun nodded. “It is fine. We need to make sure they do not try and flank us though. We should get—”

Sloane turned as she heard a commotion behind her again. Her stomach dropped, thinking that they *had* been flanked, only to see the caravan approaching. Ismeld and Deryk led the way on their horses, with Stefan driving the first wagon. Ernard and Maud rode two other horses on either side of the three wagons.

Gisele seemed conflicted, and Sloane understood. On one hand, they had more people there to help them, and on another, it simply gave more targets for the Valeni to hit. *We need to resolve this without attacks.*

“*Gisele! Where do you need us?*” Deryk called out.

The woman turned her head slightly and looked at Sloane. The knight-captain was still maintaining a shield, so Sloane responded for her. “Just come pick us up, then we are going to move forward *really* slowly.”

The wagons slowed as they reached Sloane and Nemura, with the guardswoman helping Sloane up onto the wagon with Stefan. Sloane watched the Valeni who seemed hesitant to do anything and just kind of stood around, arguing.

“Gisele, hop up here with us. Keep focusing on the shield. I’m going to do something. I’ll tell you when to drop it.”

As she stood up, Tiberius took off from her shoulder and flew up to the roof of the wagon. Sloane cast a series of weak **Mana Bolts** and *Altered* the ten of them to hover and follow them. She then aimed away from the Valeni and fired off a weaker **Arcane Explosion**. The siege spell arced and exploded away from everyone, but with a large enough blast, that dirt fell near both groups.

The five Valeni’s surprise was evident in how their arms simply dropped to their sides and stared wide-eyed and slack-jawed at where the spell had gone off. Sloane narrowed her eyes. “Gisele. Drop it.”

The woman nodded and lowered her hand, the shield collapsing as she did. Sloane had her **Mana Bolts** move in large circular patterns as the wagons started moving forward. The Valeni stepped backward off of the road, and Sloane was finally able to get a good look at them

as the caravan passed them. The five men each had short pointed ears like a telv, except unlike most of the people she had seen, they had beards. Two of the men in the back whispered to each other with one pointing at Sloane. Another raised his hood, almost as if he were trying to hide from her sight.

She almost said something but then the man in the front said something in a language she did not understand. The man to his left said something as well then the first gave her a slow nod of his head. The Valeni's eyes never left her own, and she nearly gasped in surprise. *They have cat eyes!*

There was no conflict as their caravan passed, but the knights on the horses made sure to follow from behind and keep an eye on the five who remained where they were. When Sloane looked back after Ismeld rode by on her horse, there was no sight of them.

The group seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief after that. Sloane leaned back and looked behind a tense Stefan over at Gisele. "Did you see their eyes?"

Gisele nodded. "Yes. That... That was *strange*. I have only seen a few Valeni in my life, and none had anything like that."

Sloane nodded. "It was wild. Who *are* the Valeni?"

"They are the natives of the continent. They are a collective of telv, orkun, and raithe who were never conquered by the Loreni. They retreated from the Old Empire to the Val Forests, and defend them to this day from any outsiders," Stefan interjected.

"Only one Val Forest has ever been conquered. It is said that Eona herself provides for the Valeni in their forest homes and they have become her guardians in return. Most who venture into the forests, do not return," Gisele said.

"How many are there?"

Gisele shrugged. "Many. There are five such forests in the Sovereign Cities region alone. Four in Avira. Even two in Lymtoria."

Sloane shivered. "Tiberius saw many of those areas that had high concentrations of mana in the forest. The monsters were animals adversely affected by mana..."

“What are you saying, Sloane?” Stefan asked.

Who knows how much they were changed, and how much more they will be just by living close to those mana... wells.

“The Valeni... I think they may have been affected as well.”

* * *

Ressa looked up at the approaching cavalry as it slowed to a stop and the captain dismounted. The remaining men very deliberately found other things to look at, that is, until her second ordered them to assist in the collection duties. *Our deceased will be treated with dignity and respect.*

Captain Mor'rek glanced hesitantly around the scene as he approached her. She heard the man take a deep breath before coming to a stop, going down on one knee, and lowering his head.

“Commander, I have failed Vlaredia. I accept any punishment you deem necessary,” he said. *Good. He accepted responsibility.* She had sent a rider as soon as she reached the scene with orders for the light cavalry squad to make their way here with all due haste. The rider then continued to Goosebourne and General Razane, as she awaited the man in front of her.

“Stand up, Captain,” Ressa ordered. She waited until he stood then continued, “Look around. What do you see?”

“Death and destruction. It looks like an army assaulted this location.”

“Yes. This would have happened to you as well. *If you had provoked them.*”

The man looked surprised and glanced around. She gave the man a moment to process the scene around them. There was no sign of the tower that had been constructed other than scattered rubble that gave no impression of what its previous form had been. The campsite was simply... gone. There was rubble where a storage shed had previously been. Her team had set up

a collection point where they attempted to sort through the remains of thirty-one of the soldiers who had been stationed here. *That was going to take a lot more time. Some are just... parts.*

“What can you tell me of a tanned woman with curly brown hair, Captain?”

The man’s head tilted and his eyes squinted. “There was one woman who had hair like that, her name was Baroness Reinhart. She wore a cloak, however, so I could only see what peeked out from the sides.”

Ressa nodded. “Baroness Reinhart. Tell me about her.”

“She was very confident and a bit overbearing. The Baroness said that she had business in Avira. When questioned, she stated they would be traveling through Rosale.”

“You said she wore a cloak? Did you not ask her to remove it?”

“I did, however, her cousin, Lady d’Argin of Blightwych joined the conversation and objected. They had five knights, the two ladies—of which Lady d’Argin was well armed as well—and two guards. Both guards also looked professional. I did not feel confident in forcing any issue...”

Ressa pointedly looked at where the watchtower once stood. “It is well that you did not.”

She paused as she considered what the man related. She knew of Blightwych’s royal family. She knew of the families for every kingdom. Lady d’Argin was not well known, but she was in the line of succession for the throne. *Sixth if I remember correctly.* She was also a knight of a small order, mainly due to her friendship with the woman who formed it. One notable thing about the noblewoman though... She had no baroness cousins from a House Reinhart.

Ressa wasn’t sure of what to make of that, but there was seemingly something more there. The sole survivor of this attack had described what he had seen. From what she was told, the entire event was chaotic. He wasn’t sure what happened, only that their archers were firing on the caravan and a woman with a crossbow fired back—killing two men. Then as the Commander of the Vlaredian forces finally organized his troops to attack the small group, the curly-haired woman—Baroness Reinhart—used magic and obliterated the tower *and* all but one of the men stationed there.

*There is no reason to be on this road if they were traveling to Rosale. The only place this road goes to is—*Ressa's eyes widened. The caravan wasn't traveling to the coastal kingdom to the south. *Why? Are they attempting to warn the Sovereigns? That doesn't make sense, they hadn't been anywhere near Goosebourne.* The scene around her worried her, though. If one woman could do this, what feats could her nation's actual enemies perform?

I cannot allow her to assist the Sovereigns.

She turned back to the captain who had been waiting patiently. "Captain Mor'rek, my team, and I will be leaving immediately. You and your men are to take control of this scene until the General sends adequate forces to relieve you. Once you are relieved, you will pass a message along to the General from me, along with a full report."

The man saluted. "What is the message, Commander?"

"I have found a target and will be tracking it. The potential for threat against Vlaredia is high. Target has already spilled Vlaredian blood, and could single-handedly tilt any battle against us. Please inform your cousin of my initial destination."

She felt her magic flow through her body as her determination rose. That woman was a problem. One that would need to be handled carefully.

Captain Mor'rek nodded. "Understood. Where are you heading, Commander?"

Ressa's eyes narrowed. "Marketbol."