

Hidden Gems

The group was stopped for the night. The next day they would arrive at the second to last village before the city. Sloane gazed around from where she was sitting by the fire, observing the knights as they talked and reminisced.

Ernald laughed and looked to the woman who had a permanent scowl on her face next to him. “Ismeld, remember that bloke in Moonlock? You know—”

“Ernald, if you wish to keep hold of your tongue, do not mention that unmentionable being again.”

Cristole smiled and joined in. “Ismeld, you really have to tell us why you didn’t rip that man in two.”

“Yes, Issy, we all know your disposition to ripping men in half. Thanks to you, we’ve left quite the trail of broken-hearted and dismembered men in our wake.” Ernald spoke quickly then shielded himself. Sloane laughed as Ismeld smacked him across the arm and aimed at his head for another.

“I swear to Relena, Ernald, I will castrate you.” Ismeld threatened.

With a big grin, Ernald jumped up and started to run away, but not before chiming in one more time. “Sounds like your kind of date!”

Gisele looked amused. “Ismeld, if you don’t go get him, I will for you.” She chuckled.

As Ismeld ran after Ernald, Sloane heard her start laughing.

Gisele looked over to Deryk, “Are we ready for tomorrow Deryk?”

“We are. We’ll arrive in Vilstaf mid-afternoon.” The stoic man kept it short and to the point.

“Good, we’ll rest there for a couple of days. It will give us time to recuperate before our last push to Thirdghyll.” Gisele sighed a bit. “Finally, we’ll be somewhere we can pause for a bit. All this traveling is making me weary.”

Maud nodded, “It will be good to just relax and not worry about quickly leaving for the next place. How long were we planning to stay in Thirdghyll before heading to Swanbrook? I want time to get a nice bath.”

“I want something besides inn and tavern food. A good wine.” Cristole said as he scratched at his cheek.

Gisele glanced up in thought, quickly eying Sloane before the leader of the group responded, “We can spare at least two or three weeks. It will give us time to get Sloane some quality equipment made. We can also use that time to get her acclimated to what high society is actually like.” She caught Sloane’s eye again and smirked, “I promise there’s more to Westaren than the rustic scenery you’ve seen so far.”

Cristole held up a hand, “Gisele, did you just say you consider Thirdghyll an improvement? Come now, you know the central district is *literally* the only decent area. The rest is... rough.”

Maud shook her head, “It’s not *that* bad. The last time I was here, they were trying to improve conditions in the outskirts. The outer city is pretty bad though.”

“As knights, we will be allowed to stay within the central district. We will be fine.” Gisele grimaced a bit then looked over to Sloane, “just make sure to hold onto your coin purse on the way to that point.”

Sloane nodded, “The next market I see, I’d like to look around. There are a bunch of things I’d like to try working on. A city that we’ll be in for a few weeks will be a good time to experiment and put in some work.”

“That’s fine. We’ll also show you how the banking guild works when we get to Thirdghyll.” Gisele added.

Cristole straightened a bit, “I can help you with that. I have some business with them myself.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that.” Sloane looked around, noticing Deryk just sitting off to the side staring off into the dark. “Deryk, buddy. You know the silent brooding type is a bit cliché, come on, you know you can talk too.”

Deryk's eyes narrowed a bit, “I have nothing to say.”

Cristole chuckled, “Don’t mind him, Sloane. This is just who he is.”

“Yeah, we still love him! It makes everything he says have *that* much more meaning.” Maud chimed in.

The conversation died down and Sloane leaned back as Maud and Cristole started quietly talking about something that she couldn’t catch. She looked over and saw Gisele looking at her notebook; lost in thought.

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Sloane sat in the wagon as she recollected the trip so far. They were almost to the city of Thirdghyll. However, the trip had taken a week longer than they had first thought. They had stopped at every village and town along the way, trying to gain any information on Gwyn or even just other humans. While they hadn’t gotten any information as of yet, the time it took gave Sloane a chance to work out a way to decipher the mana around them, as well as, try and form her own magic. She felt she was nearly there, but considered that perhaps she had been looking at things a bit incorrectly.

Sloane believed that while Maud had definitely used something related to *life*, that didn’t fit the mana completely. She had started to simply refer to mana types by the colors that the mana associated with them exhibited. So far, she had managed to use her watch to observe red, blue, and green mana.

She *believed* there was white or even colorless mana, and she was almost positive that the core of a person is what determined what type of mana they had access to. It was for this

reason that Sloane was working on trying to access colorless mana first. She kept trying to apply elements to the mana, but it seemed more and more that each color was based on a concept. Perhaps by working off of base mana, she could figure out what her core's mana affinity was, or simply figure out how to get her MagiWatch—name pending, she thought with a chuckle—to interact with something other than active mana use. This way she could simply scan cores within people.

As she sat in the back of the wagon, Sloane tried concentrating on her core. She could sense it now. There was undoubtedly mana flowing through her, but for some reason, she didn't feel like she could conjure up a fireball or anything. It was frustrating.

After another thirty minutes with nothing to show for it, she stopped for the day. She was getting nowhere. Groaning in frustration, she got up and leaned out the side door to look around.

She noticed Ser Cristole riding next to the wagon, “Hey, Cristole! How much further?”

“We're only a couple of hours away from the village of Vilstaf. How are your attempts at using magic going?” Cristole inquired.

Sloane groaned again, “I can *feel* my core, I can *feel* the mana. I just do not know how to *use* the mana.”

Cristole shrugged, “I'm sorry. Admittedly, I have no idea how any of it works.”

“I know, sorry, just frustrated.”

Sloane looked toward the front of the wagon, “Hey! Ernard! Maud! Do either of you want to swap?”

Ser Ernard peeked around the corner, “Yes! My arse is numb!”

Sloane couldn't help but laugh.

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The group came upon the village of Vilstaf a few hours later. Sloane sat with Maud on the bench as the wagon slogged along. Vilstaf and one other village would be the last two before Thirdghyll.

Curious, Sloane looked over to Maud, “Hey, Maud, what’s the deal with this village? The rest were all built around some type of specialty, which seems oddly planned, now that I say it out loud.”

Maud looked up for a second, considering, “This village specializes in gemstones from a nearby mine. It gets a lot of trader traffic so its market is a bit large for the size of the village, as well. Most people that live here either work in the market or with the gems.

“As for your other question, the Kingdom of Westaren was once part of the Sovereign Cities. Eventually, a king established himself in the port city of Ocieneva and conquered the main cities that now make up the kingdom. The Sovereign Cities traditionally have villages within their demesne that provide specific functions to the city they belong. Westaren took this concept and applied it to the entire kingdom.”

Sloane thought it was oddly practical, “but, how have the Sovereign Cities maintained their independence? I saw a map; they’re surrounded by other kingdoms and even an empire.”

“They war between each other often, constantly trying to gain some edge. However, if focused on by an outside nation, they will band together. The founding of Westaren strengthened this connection. The opposite is also now true, if any one city seeks to form a new kingdom by conquering its neighbors, the rest will come down on it.”

“I don’t believe that has a parallel in my world. At least not that I can readily think of. I can think of a few *close* situations, but this is interesting. Now,” Sloane smirked, “why is it called Thirdghyll? Was there a first and second?”

Ser Maud chuckled, “Indeed! It was originally just the city of Ghyll, however, when it was conquered during the formation of Westaren, most of the city was destroyed. It was built back up, and the people cheekily renamed it Secondghyll. Then, almost one hundred years to the day later, a fire destroyed two-thirds of the city. That is when they named it Thirdghyll. There are currently bets as to if the city will be devastated again in some way.”

Sloane was shocked, “They’d bet on something like that?”

“The people of Ghyll are very hardy. They say they can come back from anything. Coincidentally, within the next half-year, it will have been one-hundred years since the fire,” Maud recalled.

Sloane shook her head, “Oh no, and we’re going there? Maud. I don’t want the city to fall apart around me.”

Maud laughed, “Chin up! We’re going to be fine. It’s all in good fun. Nothing’s going to happen.”

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They arrived at the medium-sized village, and Sloane noticed that the central plaza, indeed, hosted a large market. Two inns had multiple caravans of merchants and travelers both loading and unloading their supplies. Sloane was surprised that the village had somehow remained so small for how many travelers there were. She would have expected that more and more people would arrive to take advantage of the route.

As they waited for Gisele to return from inside the inn. Sloane tapped Maud, “How long has the village been here?”

“I’m not sure, I think about a year? Maybe more?” Maud guessed.

Ah, so I was right. This village will be booming soon.

“I need to make some money. I’d, really, like to look at some of those gems and other goods. I want to start making things.”

“You demonstrated your knowledge when you precipitated the creation of my mace. We would be happy to provide funding—within reason, of course—for you to pursue your crafting. If you can resell anything, that would be better...” Maud informed her.

“It would be better because then you could recoup some of the investment *and* it would give me funds to work with on my own?” Sloane finished for her.

“Just so.”

Sloane smiled. “Thank you, I think there is a lot of potential there to be explored. Especially, if I can figure out things that can benefit the rest of the group.”

Maud returned her smile. “That would be amazing, Sloane. Alright– ”

Gisele came out of the inn and called out, “We’re good! Take the wagon to the rear.”

“Just a second,” Maud said to Sloane.

She then turned and banged on the wall. After a minute, Ernard opened the door. “What is it, Maud?” He called out groggily.

Maud turned and looked around the corner at him. “Get off your arse. Need you to put the wagon in the back. We’re going inside.”

Sloane heard Ernard’s exaggerated groan as she got down from the wagon.

She couldn’t wait to check out the market.