

Vitae

They arrived back at the inn, finding the wagon parked in front. Both the side and rear doors were open with Maud and Gisele loading the supplies. Ser Deryk came walking out of the inn carrying a crate, passing it up to Ser Gisele who loaded it onto the roof and strapped it down.

When they got close, Gisele jumped down and looked at the group. “Nice of you all to join us.” She looked over everyone, settling on Sloane. “I see you got some travel clothing. That’s good. That will be helpful.” Looking to Ser Cristole who held the sacks of food and supplies, she added, “What else did you manage to purchase?”

Ser Cristole lifted the two bags, “Rations and other various supplies to help us get through the journey to Thirdghyll. I got you some cheese I know you’ll love too.”

Gisele snorted, “Of course you did. Like you always do when you know you managed to get out of doing most of the work.”

Cristole chuckled, “Better to get you something as an apology than to show no remorse, yeah?”

Ser Gisele tilted her head, “I suppose that’s true.”

Taking that as his cue, Ser Cristole headed toward the stables to retrieve the horses.

Looking to her last two knights, Gisele asked. “Ismeld, Ernard, you two good?”

Ismeld nodded, “We are good. Ser Ernard, hand Sloane the package. Let’s go assist Deryk. With your leave, Knight-Captain.”

Gisele nodded, “Of course. I suppose I have you to thank for taking Sloane to purchase clothing. Ernard, we’ll talk more later.”

Ismeld and Ernard nodded, the latter handing Sloane the box with the mace before they went to help Ser Deryk finish loading up the wagon. She looked over at Ser Maud and called out to her. “Ser Maud! We got something for you. Come here!”

Gisele looked a bit confused but seemed content to wait for an explanation as Maud walked over. Handing Maud the box, she explained, "So, the wolves we killed had what we are tentatively calling a core, or mana core, within them. A new organ that emanates mana, the substance that allows you to perform magic. Upon death, a mana core seems to solidify about as hard as stone. The cores we took from the wolves appeared to have properties that I believe will work with the magic you demonstrated. Thinking of a way to harness that core for your magic, we went to the local smith and purchased you a new weapon." They followed her to the wagon as she talked. Standing next to the side door, she finished with a bright smile and hands clasped in front of her. "Please, open the box."

Maud's face went through a range of emotions, before settling on her usual excitement as Sloane finished her explanation. She placed the box onto the steps leading into the wagon and opened the lid. With a gasp, she looked at the beautiful mace that lay inside. Her piercing green eyes darted to Sloane, "Really? This is for me?" Maud asked as she carefully hefted the mace from the container.

Ser Gisele's eyes widened as she saw the mace. "That is gorgeous. You said it should enhance her healing magic?"

Sloane nodded, "Yes, I believe so. Maud, do you feel anything as you hold it? Can you try both pushing your magic into it or try to somehow pull magic out of it?"

With a look of pure concentration, Maud tried manipulating her magic with the help of the mace. At first, nothing happened, but then after a couple of minutes, with sweat dripping down her brow, the Knight-Medic jerked as something seemed to click. Slowly, the mace's head and the orb contained within started glowing a light green color. Both Ser Gisele and Sloane's eyes went wide, their attention locked onto Ser Maud as she cast her spell.

Maud looked at them, and raising the mace to point it at Sloane, she focused and after a second, a subtle green flash washed over Sloane. The healer lowered the mace and looked at her two observers, "How do you feel?"

Sloane looked down and took stock of herself. Where she had been tired before from being gone all day, now she was utterly refreshed. Only realizing it by their absence, aches that she hadn't paid attention to, were also now gone. She felt as if she could run a marathon. She looked up at Maud who had a smile on her face, "I feel amazing. How do you feel? It looked like you were concentrating pretty hard."

Maud nodded, “Yes, it took a bit to figure out exactly how to perform what you suggested. However, I think it will go easier next time... actually–” She looked at Ser Gisele, raised her mace, and performed the same action as before.

With the same light green flash, Gisele immediately straightened, gasping as she did so. “Maud, this is amazing. I also feel perfect. Do you think this would help heal a wound like Ser Ernard's?”

Maud considered the question, “Yes, I do. However, I feel that performing the same action on a wound will not be as easy or widespread as what you are feeling now.” She looked to Sloane, “Thank you, Lady Sloane. This is an absolutely wonderful gift. I will treasure it.”

Ser Gisele smiled, “I agree, Lady Sloane, the benefit from this weapon alone will be indispensable for our group. Thank you.”

She nodded, smiling, “I am happy that I was able to provide something beneficial to all of you. I look forward to being able to do more in our journey.”

Gisele placed a hand on her shoulder, “Thank you for not giving up on us Lady Sloane. I know our decision for the journey wasn't exactly what you hoped for but–”

“–I heard the plan last night, Ser Gisele, and talked to the others today while we were gone. It's okay. I understand where you are coming from. That said, it doesn't downplay the help you have and will be giving on the way to Swanbrook.” Sloane finished for her.

Continuing, she added. “I also received some news that will hopefully help me listen for any clues into Gwyn's whereabouts. There has been at least one other human transported here to your world. Ser Ernard and I hope that it means even more of my people have made it here. Maybe, it will help spread the news of any that are here so that I can pick up a trail to follow.”

“I am gladdened that you understand, and look forward to what more you can do. Now, if you'll excuse me, it seems the others are nearly done packing. I want our group to leave town and be away before any more wolves attack.” With a slight bow, she turned and walked to where the others were gathering.

Sloane looked at the cheerful redhead with a smile, her ears poking out from her long curly hair that seemed to have a life of its own. “And then there were two. Will you drive the wagon first, Ser Maud? Maybe we can talk and I can tell you about my world and my daughter?”

Even Ser Maud's eyes smiled when she replied, "I would love that Lady Sloane. Let's finish up here, then we can be off." She started to turn, then stopped. "Lady Sloane?"

Sloane tilted her head slightly, "Yes?"

Maud rushed forward, grabbing and holding her in a tight hug. Whispering into her ear, Sloane could hear her voice catching. "Thank you. You have no idea what this gesture means to me. I hope that one day you will."

Sloane hugged her back, and they stood there embracing, emotions threatening to overtake them both. With one last squeeze, Maud stepped back, dropping her arms to her side. Grabbing Sloane's hand to pull her along, "Come. Let's go."

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Five hours later, Maud and Sloane sat on the wagon's driving bench as they traveled on the road toward Thirdghyll. They would be stopping in seven villages and two towns along the way. All told, Ser Gisele expected the trip to take a month, more if any unforeseen delays occurred. After everything that had happened so far? *Something* was going to pop up, it was inevitable.

It took two more hours. Just two, before one such event occurred. Sloane felt as if she needed one of those 'Days Since Last Incident' workplace safety signs. The group came along a merchant wagon that had been attacked by what the knights assumed were bandits. The wagon's goods had been looted and there were three bodies tossed in a nearby ditch. They didn't stay long but the knights did provide last rites to the deceased and buried them in stone mounds.

She learned a bit about the religion after that. Sitting with Maud in the wagon while Ernard had taken over the driving, Maud explained. "I sometimes take for granted that there's even a possibility of someone not knowing who the gods are."

Sloane chuckled, "Well, I *am* from an entirely different world. We have our own religions."

Maud looked surprised, “You have more than one?”

Sloane smiled, “We do! Perhaps I can tell you about them sometime.” she deflected, the religion of Avira was relevant, however, she didn’t wish to get into a theological debate with what was essentially a person who lived in their world’s middle ages. She wasn’t sure how religious the people here were, but she felt it a bad idea to potentially debate or introduce concepts from her world. “Could you tell me what I should expect here? I noticed a temple inside of Valesbeck, but was that to all of your gods or just one?”

Maud nodded, “Of course. So, temples. Villages will usually have a shrine or two that will typically just be a place to venerate and worship at a personal level to a specific god. Some villages will have dedicated services on specific days around the shrine. Meanwhile, towns like Valesbeck will host a Temple of the Celestials. This is a dedicated temple to the entire pantheon. Depending on the size of the temple, it may be broken down into separate chapels for each of the four major gods. There may also be a hall of shrines dedicated to the minor gods.”

Maud took a breath, “Whew. That’s a lot. Okay, so next we have the cities, like Thirdghyll. They will have dedicated temples to each major god. Larger cities may even have smaller temples to specific minor gods. However, if you’re lucky, they’ll simply have a single temple dedicated to the lot.”

Sloane took it all in, “Sounds pretty reasonable. So, there are major and minor gods. Are there, like, good gods and bad gods?”

Maud raised an eyebrow, “No. What? The gods are just gods. They are neutral in the affairs of the people. First, we will talk about the major gods, there are four of them in the Celestial Family. Alos, the Father Sun; he provides light for the day, and heat to keep out the cold. His domains are protection, justice, and strength. His avatar is a sun elf, signified by their dark skin and fiery eye; like Ernard. Alos protects.”

Pausing to ensure Sloane was still following, she continued. “Next we have Eona, our Mother World. We reside upon her, and she gives us life. With her husband, Alos, she ensures that nature provides. Her domains are nature, growth, and instinct. Her avatar takes on the form of any of her children but is usually in her high elf form. Our world is called Eona, and, as a healer, she is my patron goddess. Eona provides.”

“Next, we have the Sister Moons. Relena, the larger Moon, was given the honor of presiding over the Afterlife. She ensures that all souls are able to make their way to her and find their eternal peace. Her avatar is a raithe. The other sister is Tenera, she is the goddess of the night. Her moon shines the brightest in the night sky, as a light to comfort us in our darkest moments. Her domain is darkness and righteous vengeance. She manifests her avatar as a moon elf. The Sisters bring peace.”

Sloane’s eyes widened, she hadn’t expected that turn. “Righteous vengeance? That came out of nowhere.”

Maud nodded solemnly, “Tenera’s Father realizes that true justice may not always be possible in its purest form. Therefore, he charged his Daughter with ensuring those who have been wronged in the worst ways, are guided toward their righteous vengeance. So that they may do so with purpose, and maintain their honor.”

“Finally, we have the Stars, the minor gods. There are nine of them, however, perhaps we can discuss them at another time? I do not wish to overwhelm you.” Maud said considerately.

Sloane appreciated the thought, “Thank you for all the knowledge, Ser Maud. This will help me immensely. Now... could you explain some of the cultural faux pas I should be aware of?”

Maud smiled, “Of course! I’d be happy to help you. First, let’s start with verbal and nonverbal communication.”

Sloane had to force herself to not cringe, realizing she may have inadvertently asked for more than she had intended. She resolved to sit through her instruction and learn; it would only help her in the end.

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Sloane was sitting up front with Ernard when Ser Ismeld, who had been riding ahead, came rushing back. “Ser Maud! You are needed!” She called out.

Ser Gisele looked at her, “What happened?”

Ser Ismeld explained as Maud jumped down and hurried to the group from the back of the wagon where she had been sitting. “There’s a merchant who is wounded ahead. He’s been walking for hours, he was part of the caravan that was attacked. He’s not going to make it to the next village.”

Ser Gisele looked to Maud and then made a decision. “Ser Deryk, give Ser Maud your horse. Maud, take Sloane. She may be able to help you with any of the magic.”

Sloane and Maud looked at each other, nodding, then she hopped off of the wagon and hastened to the horse that Deryk was holding for Maud. Maud climbed up and then Deryk assisted Sloane to get on behind the knight-medic.

Maud turned her head to try and peek behind her at Sloane. “You ready?”

“Ready.”

Ismeld nodded. “Follow me.” She instantly spurred her horse forward, galloping back the way she had come from. Maud rushed to stay close. Sloane gripped onto Maud for dear life, not used to riding a horse at such speeds.

It didn’t take long but soon enough, they came upon an armored sun elf who was crouched down next to a male telv who was sitting down against a tree. It was clear that the telv was not in a good shape. The elf had his hands pressed against the other man, applying pressure to what she could only assume was a stab wound. The guard looked up as they approached, “You’ve returned. Thank you, milady. Please, help Master Raolin.”

Maud handed her bridle straps to Ser Ismeld as she jump down from the horse, pulled out her mace, and rushed to the wounded merchant.

Sloane took a bit longer to get down, but as she walked over, she looked toward Maud who had taken over from the guard. “What can I do?”

Maud looked up at her, “This will be confusing. Please take—” She stopped then turned her attention to the guard who looked at her then Sloane.

The guard hurriedly introduced himself, “I’m Averet, milady. What can I do?”

“Go with Lady Sloane. I need some space, but I will save your employer.” Maud stated with conviction.

Averet nodded hesitantly and looked at Sloane with a worried expression. She gestured to him and then to an area a few meters away. “Come, let’s allow her to work.”

Giving Maud the space she needed to work, Averet pressed. “What is she going to do?”

Sloane looked at him then back to Maud. “You are about to see something, frankly, miraculous. Please do not interrupt Ser Maud after she begins, no matter what you see.”

Averet seemed to become concerned, “But, that doesn’t really—”

“Wait. She’s starting. Watch.” Sloane interrupted.

They watched as Maud, holding her mace in her right hand, held her left over the wound. Much quicker than she had demonstrated before, her hand took on that soft green glow that Sloane was coming to associate with, at the very least, life magic. After a few seconds, the area surrounding the wound was lit up with that same green before it flashed brightly. Maud lowered her hand and slumped slightly. Determined, she started examining the wound.

Sloane looked toward Averet, “Come, let’s see if she needs any further assistance.”

Maud looked up at Sloane as she stepped next to her, a proud look on her face. “I did it, Sloane, the wound is closed. I felt around, and it seems as if the inside was also healed.”

Raolin was looking down at the hole in his tunic that showed nothing except smooth, healed flesh. He looked up to Averet, who had tears in his eyes as he dropped to his knees next to the telv. Averet spoke to Raolin. “You’re okay! Milord!” He looked to Ser Maud, “Praise Eona. You performed a miracle milady!”

Raolin looked to Maud as well, “Eona provides. Milady, you have my undying gratitude. I would have died if not for you. I owe you a debt.”

Ser Maud bowed her head. “Eona provides. I simply did as any healer should, as She says. Please, take it easy. Our wagon will be here soon. You should not try to walk to the next village on foot. Allow us to escort you.”

The merchant guard looked between them all, “You knights are as honorable as I had imagined.” Looking to Raolin, he added, “I believe we should take them up on the offer, milord. You should still rest.”

Sloane stepped next to Maud and squeezed her shoulder. “You’re doing great. You didn’t even need me here.”

Maud placed her hand atop Sloane’s and squeezed it gently as she looked into her eyes. “Maybe, but having you around, while I do all of this, helps me remain calm. Your confidence wears off on me, and then I know I can do it.”

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It wasn’t long before Ser Gisele and the others met up with them. After getting the merchant and his guard set up inside the wagon, they continued their journey. Maud sat with them, to keep an eye on her first patient that she had healed from near death with magic. Ser Gisele had switched her horse for Ser Ernard and drove the wagon, sitting next to Sloane.

“Her ability is improving. This will get out, others will come to her.” She expressed, speaking of Maud.

Sloane nodded. “Maybe, at least at first. I believe we all have the potential to learn magic. She simply had a strong affinity with what I am currently calling the Life Element. I feel like I too am getting closer and closer to connecting with my mana.”

Gisele looked surprised, “You are? That’s very good Sloane. I shall work on it myself then if you truly do believe any of us can learn it.”

“I do. If Ser Ernard and I are correct, we all should have a new organ that connects us to the mana. We simply need to learn how to utilize it. What I’ve been trying to do is meditate whenever I can. Trying to feel it around us to connect to it. I’m learning though. I could be wrong,” she explained.

“We will be at the village of Tunstead soon. We will need to inform them of the bandit attack and see if they can help our two new friends. Also, we can ask if there has been any news about any of your people arriving. I would like to ask if you could please wear your cloak with the hood up as we enter the village. The fewer questions the better.”

A few minutes later, Sloane noticed Ser Gisele with a far-off look on her face. Sloane watched as the Knight-Captain sighed, leaning back against the bench they sat upon, deep in contemplation. She seemed almost weary.

“The world really is changing isn't it, Lady Sloane? It seems... that you may be one to heed if others want to stay at the forefront of everything that is happening... I look forward to the possibility of gaining my own magic for both my people and myself... but I also am curious in observing your progress.”

Sloane just nodded, agreeing with her as she sat there fantasizing about all the magic she would learn. Wondering if Gwyn would also learn to use all the mana around them.