

## Upheaval

*West Ikios has seen its fair share of wars, but the war that began between the Empire of Vlaredia and the Sovereign Cities set alight a wildfire that would tear nearly the entire region asunder for many years to come. It became what is now the most studied war in history due to being the earliest modern example of arcane warfare. As the use of mana increased, the greater cost of warfare quickly became evident. Subsequent research into both offensive and defensive uses of mana created a foundation that lasts to this day.*

- *Mana and War: The Three Parties War. 179 SA*

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Just outside of the borders of the Kingdom of Westaren, a small caravan of wagons had stopped for the night. They had slowly traveled for weeks since the fall of Thirdghyll, whose survivors were even now making their way to a small town called Vilstaf.

Shaken by the sudden appearance and assault of beings that could only be called monsters, the members of the caravan were alert and slept in shifts. A group of weary knights sat off to the side, discussing their future as the knight-captain of their order spoke with the woman who led the other half of the caravan. That woman's House had grown and now included five others and would only grow from there as she sought a way to sustain all that was required to effectuate her mission.

The caravan was far from where Princess Gwyn Reinhart prepared to leave for an Academy, whose retainers fought a polite war of recognition. That royal girl's mother, Baroness Sloane Reinhart, scrutinized a map.

"We're still a couple of weeks from the town, but Tiberius noticed troops here, here, and here," she said, pointing her dagger at areas she had seen forces blocking their route to Goosebourne.

Gisele nodded slowly as she examined the rough map that Sloane had drawn. It depicted the area in between where they currently rested and the immediate surroundings of Goosebourne. A town they had planned on stopping for resupply, and for Sloane to pass on a message.

Before the events that led to the fall, Sloane had met with a man who was from the secretive order of spies and assassins that the Kingdom of Westaren maintained. That Order of Secrets had condemned an entire city to monsters, solely to ensure they could end the reign of the corrupt count who ruled it. She wondered what had happened to Giallo, who had mentioned that his people would take advantage of the chaos to enact their plan.

*I never saw what happened to the count after the monsters attacked his small army.*

She knew that there were survivors from the city. After learning how to do it, she sent Tiberius back and used her **Golem Sight** to watch the East Fort. The soldiers under Captain Jorin had repelled five attacks by the monsters, finally evacuating survivors from the city on the third day. She had Tiberius drop off a note to the captain explaining what they knew of Goosebourne, hoping it would find its way to Giallo. Captain Jorin had passed along a message himself, containing orders that provided a discharge of honor and access to funds within the Banking Guild for Nemura.

The big telv had definitely teared up a little when she had read the message. *I need to discuss the future with her and the others.*

Sloane shivered and pulled her cloak a little tighter around herself as she waited for Gisele to come to a decision.

Finally, the orkun woman sighed. She looked up from the map. “We do not have a choice, really. If what you described is true...” she lifted a hand to stop Sloane from interjecting. “and I do not doubt that it is, Goosebourne has already, or nearly fallen. We have noncombatants with us, nor would nine people make any true difference. Plus, neither we nor your House should take a side in this war. I believe we should try and bypass the city by going, here,” she said while pointing at a point on the map.

Sloane leaned forward, seeing that their path would come close to where she saw troops.

“Why there?”

“The land further west is rocky and not suitable for the wagons. There is a small road here that we can take to bypass Goosebourne. Then we will need to skirt the edge of the forest down to Marketbol,” she explained.

“We may run into troops here though.”

“There is nothing we can do about that. We will show that our origins are from Blightwych and as such are not part of either side. Explain that we are simply heading through to Rosale.”

Sloane squinted. “Rosale? But...”

Gisele shook her head. “We do not want to tell them we are staying in the Sovereign Cities. Rosale is a safer option. They don’t need to know where we are actually heading for us to get past them.”

“Ah, yes. That makes sense.”

Gisele pushed off her knees and stood up. “You should discuss with your House members. We’ll set up watches. I would appreciate it if you could have Nemura and Stefan take shifts to patrol inside the camp itself.”

Sloane nodded. *It seems she is already trying to distance herself.*

She watched as the woman walked away, and was about to stand up when Adaega sat down next to her. The dark-skinned woman was seemingly getting better day by day, and it was due in no small part to Ernald.

“Lady Sloane? May we talk?”

“Ms. Merbaker. Please, call me ‘Sloane’. What can I do for you?”

The woman fidgeted slightly, seemingly nervous. “...Sloane, Ernald has told me some, but could you tell me more about yourself? Where do you come from?”

Sloane relaxed a bit and smiled.

“Of course.”

What followed was a talk that lasted nearly an hour. Sloane told her all about her version of Earth and about Gwyn. They finished with the plans and goals Sloane had. It felt good getting most of it out, especially to another human. Even if that human was from somewhere vastly different. The woman’s world was on a vastly different calendar, but she was able to guess that the world was at somewhat the same stage of development as hers from the fifties.

Adaega shook her head. "It is just so hard to believe. We're here, in this fantasy world but come from such different worlds ourselves."

"You don't say." Sloane chuckled. "Your nation is a mouthful! The Unified Kingdom of..."

The woman next to her huffed in amusement. "The Unified Kingdom of Yoruba and Dahomey. We simply call it the UK."

The woman's world had some crazy divergences compared to Sloane's, and her nation sat within the same area of Africa that Niger, Nigeria, and the two smaller nations next to Ghana that she couldn't remember. The main divergence was that Europe had a cataclysmic volcanic event occur that caused it to be pretty uninhabitable. Evidently, it was a very active volcano zone still to the day that Adaega lived. That led to cooler temperatures over Africa, volcanic ash that settled into the soil, and an ironically better climate overall.

"What did you do for a living, Adaega?"

That made the woman straighten her back. As if they had finally reached the purpose of coming to meet Sloane. "I was the Director of Operations at the Lokoja University."

Sloane perked up. "Oh? That sounds fascinating. What does your university specialize in?"

Adaega launched into an explanation of her institution, speaking about the many different colleges of study that made up the school and how it was one of the preeminent universities in the world. As the woman described it, Sloane realized why it sounded so familiar. It was essentially their world's version of Oxford.

"What are your goals, Adaega?" Sloane asked, trying to cut to the heart of the matter.

"I-I want to be safe. I can't follow the knights. They do not know where their path will take them, and it will likely be dangerous. As much as I sympathize with your own plight, I... I just can not do it. Maybe in the future, but I do not want to put myself in danger again. Ernard says that Marketbol is a well-developed city and most importantly, safe."

Sloane understood completely. It's what she wanted for her and her daughter. After finding her, that is. Safety was important, and not everyone was cut out for what the knights

could do. Sloane didn't think she was either, but she'd be damned if she wasn't going to do it anyway.

"I see. The knights will be with us until Marketbol. It's okay, Adaega. Just ask what you wish to ask."

The woman nodded and took a deep breath to compose herself. "You are correct. I am prevaricating, my apologies. I believe I would be a beneficial addition to your research center if that Ernald described to me. Looking at those you currently have in your employ, it seems that I am uniquely suited to manage it."

Sloane raised a brow. She had expected something after hearing what the woman did for a living but outright asking to manage her center wasn't. *It makes sense though... and she would likely be a good fit.*

Adaega must have taken her silence as hesitancy instead of the contemplation that it was because she glanced back at where the knights were and then leaned forward.

"I know it's a bit forward of me. Ernald suggested I talk with your... retainers, and I did. They all seem genuinely nice. I think I can do some good there. I have experience with running something like this, and with Ms. Elodie's financial acumen, we can really expand your business and pursue some great things. Especially into materials research."

Sloane thought back to Giallo and how the man had seemed especially concerned about Adaega. He had asked her to bring the woman, to bring her to safety. Sloane wasn't sure why she was hesitating, she'd quickly agreed to add everyone else. It's not like she's the first person to be uniquely qualified for what I need.

Sloane took a deep breath. "Let's get there first and see what we can set up. There's no telling of what we can start with."

Adaega's shoulders sagged as she seemed disappointed. Sloane quickly clarified, "I'm sorry, that came out a bit differently than I had intended. I think we can come to an arrangement, Adaega. I'm not sure what position will fit the center best just yet, is all I mean."

"Ah, that makes sense. Thank you, Sloane."

The woman went silent for a moment and looked away before turning back. "I have had a lot of time to contemplate the existence of magic. Especially during my time with the count..."

Sloane remained quiet as the woman collected herself. Waiting for her to continue her thought.

"Ernald has told me a lot about what you have discussed with them. I wanted to pose a question, and you don't have to answer now, but think about it."

"Sure, anything. What's your question?"

"You designed the rings to help people with their magic, right? And help them awaken it or what mind you."

Sloane wondered where the woman was going with this line of questioning, but went along with it. "I did, yes."

"Then why do only a few of you have access to magic and mana? Is there a connection you haven't seen yet between a person and the domains you spoke of?"

Sloane froze. With all of the stuff that had happened, she had never truly gone back and worked with the knights on their magic.

"I..." she started.

Adaega held a hand up. "I had a thought, what if a connection to these domains you discovered were what facilitated someone to perform magic? Like a genetic disposition, for example. Otherwise, mana is just affecting them physically."

"That... seems sound. I will need to test that."

Adaega smiled. "Absolutely, I suggest testing on someone who hasn't been practicing as much as the knights have. Then let them know of what you find, I believe they're working under the assumption that they can all eventually do it."

Sloane instantly felt guilty but didn't say anything. She definitely owed the knights enough to put in the effort to figure it out.

The woman searched Sloane's face for a moment, then added, "I believe the Reinhart Center can expand into mana research such as that in time. Or you could even establish a second center dedicated solely to that."

Sloane's head whirled as she considered everything. She definitely felt better about Adaega, and she could see how she may have been incorrect in her initial theory. *Yeah, definitely need to test that, and I know just the person to use.*

Sloane smiled. "You know, I think you're going to be great for the center. I will test this now. Let me know if you think of anything else."

She stood up and held out a hand, Adaega smiled and got up as well. The two women shook and parted. Sloane walked to her wagon to where she could find her guinea pig.

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Stefan leaned against the wagon as Elodie spoke with the former Thirdghyll guardswoman. Nemura was asking about finances that she could use to hire more guards, and it seemed that they would have enough to maintain a standing guard for the center, but not much beyond that for some time. Stefan and Elodie both knew that the situation would be changing, especially if the Banking Guild approved Lady Reinhart's project. He only hoped the terran noble was prepared for that meeting.

He had discussed their plans with Elodie extensively. The two of them felt that with the baroness' pivot toward the Guilds in general, Stefan should stay with the woman after she moved on from Marketbol. He would work with the local guild there to provide protection for Elodie, but her safety would be well in hand if what he heard from Nemura was going to happen.

Romaris' niece had a level of excitement in her that amused him. It seemed the prospect of running the Runecard business for the Lady, along with managing the finances of the Reinhart Center, were enough for the woman to all but pledge her firstborn to the terran.

He heard footsteps and glanced over and noticed the Lady herself approaching. He pushed off of the wagon and stood up straighter.

“Hey guys, how is everything going?” Lady Reinhart asked in her typical informal way of speaking.

“It is well, My Lady. We were just discussing security requirements for the center,” Nemura explained.

“Oh! That’s good.” She squinted, focusing on Elodie as she paused. “We can afford that. Right?”

Elodie smiled. “We can. The House has funds to support a modest research facility within the merchant district.”

The Lady tilted her head. “Is there an education district? Uhm, something with a place of learning like an Academy?”

“There is. It is smaller than Thirdghyll’s but it is still a fairly respectable institute” Stefan assured her.

“Good. We should find a location within that district,” she said.

Elodie seemed confused. “But, why? Isn’t the center meant to create opportunities for investment and business?”

Sloane smiled. “Yes, it is. However, the center can create a relationship with the Academy. It is primarily a place of research in nature. This will allow us to attract talent from graduating students, who can immediately go to work in the center. You should purchase a small location in the merchant district solely for managing the customer relations business. Then expand from there.”

Elodie nodded. Stefan glanced up at Nemura and saw the woman seemed bored. *I can not blame her there.*

He was about to try and excuse himself when the Lady changed topics.

“I actually came over here for another reason. Ms. Merbaker had a thought that I wish to experiment on... err, test with Nemura and Stefan,” she said.

Stefan raised a hand and opened his mouth to say something, but couldn’t think of anything to say.



The glint in the terran's eye was a bit disconcerting, as she lowered her hand. "She theorizes that mana affects physical users differently than mental ones."

She lifted her hand again to stop Nemura from saying something. "Basically, I am going to give you a ring, one that helped me access my magic. I want to see if it does the same to you. If it doesn't, I want to know exactly what you feel."

"How will this affect us?" Nemura asked. *That is a great question.*

"I do not know, other than potentially letting you use magic? If not, then we're going to find out!"

Stefan groaned. "Fine, I'll go first. Nemura, you get my sword if I die."

The big telv grunted. "I don't want that toothpick."

He feigned hurt but smirked and turned his back toward her slightly. "Here's my back if you want to stab it again."

"No need. You are about to die anyway. Waste of energy."

Lady Reinhart did not look amused. "Really guys? You're not going to die. If anything, it'll just make you... uhh... *better?*"

"Was that a question or a statement, My Lady?" Elodie asked.

Nemura chuckled and Sloane groaned. "Not you too. Here, Stefan, try this on," she said, holding a diamond ring out toward him.

He pretended to hesitate, then grabbed the ring. "Just put it on?"

"Please."

Nodding, he slipped it onto his index finger, when nothing happened he look at her. "You have big fingers. This fit easily."

Nemura started laughing.

*"I Altered it to make sure it fit you!"* she said with exasperation.

“I don’t... Wait.” Stefan felt a slight change. It almost felt like he had more energy than normal. He bounced on his feet, and his eyes widened when he went a bit higher than he thought he would. He almost fell if it wasn’t for Nemura placing a bracing hand on his shoulder.

He huffed. “Huh. That’s different. It’s *slight* but it feels like it’s giving me a bit more energy. Barely noticeable though, kind of like when one stair is slightly lower than the rest and you misjudge it. And...” He hopped again. “Yes, already used to it.”

Sloane was staring at him with her arms crossed. “No magic?”

He shook his head. “None.”

“Do you mind if I examine you?”

His eyes shot wide and he glanced at the other two women. “Uh. Excuse me, My Lady?”

She raised a brow. “Stefan. You know very well that is not what I meant. Focus on yourself. Try to trace the feeling inside of you. Remember the rushes that we’ve gotten? Try to remember how they felt.”

He did what she said, and tried to feel... something within. Lady Sloane was peering at him and suddenly her eyes started glowing and any concentration he had vanished. “W-what are you doing?”

The glow disappeared and she snapped her head up. “*What?* I was trying to see if there was any mana flowing within you.”

“Ah. My apologies.”

She threw her hands up and stomped away.

He looked at Nemura. “Did I do something wrong?”

She shrugged. “Nobles. I don’t try and guess at what is going on in their minds.”

Elodie sighed. “Just look.”

He and Nemura turned and he noticed Sloane was returning, carrying Nemura’s shield and a sword. She handed the shield to Nemura, three symbols that Sloane had engraved in it

were glowing white with a hint of blue. “Step back, hold it up, ready to take a hit. Don’t worry, any damage can be fixed.”

She turned to Stefan and flipped the sword around then held it out hilt first. “Take this.”

He grabbed the sword and looked down at it. It was her sword and he noticed that the symbols on the blade glowed a bright blue.

“Now what?”

“Focus inside again. Feel for the mana; it’s there. You want it to make you hit harder, faster, and *better*. Nemura, be ready.”

The telv nodded and settled into a stance that would let her withstand the hit. Lady Reinhart stood back and her eyes started glowing again as she watched.

Stefan bounced on his toes and took a couple of practice swings. *This is going to be embarrassing. I swear if Nemura laughs, I am going to sprinkle floren root in her food. She’ll be shitting for weeks.*

“Swing already,” Nemura taunted.

He narrowed his eyes. *Remember the rush. Mana is making me better. Faster...*

Stefan swung, feeling a rush even as he felt his arm become stronger. His **Sudden Strike** caused the entire sword to take on a shadowy appearance as it lashed out faster than he could comprehend. It struck against the shield with such force that his arm jolted and he heard a grunt from the guardswoman.

Lady Reinhart’s eyes were big and round, and Stefan froze in shock. Nemura was the first to react. “That was a good hit! We’re gonna work well together, blade. Later, we spar.”

Stefan groaned. *That was not the intent. Maybe the root is still an option.*

Sloane smiled. “That was great! Thank you!” She pulled out her notebook and started flipping through it. Then turned around and started walking away, before stopping and turning back to them. Stefan smirked and held out the sword with one hand and the ring with the other. The woman grabbed them, going back to her notebook as she walked away.

He just chuckled and looked at Nemura. “You want to take the first shift tonight?”

She set her shield down and rolled the arm that had held it. “I can. I will go ask the knights where they would like us.”

“How much do you want to bet she was supposed to tell us?”

Nemura shook her head, smiling. “I wouldn’t take that bet,” she said offhandedly as she too walked away to meet with the knights.

Stefan looked down at his hand and flexed it before glancing up at the departing noble.

*Looks like I am in for the long haul.*