

## At Our Core

The next morning, Sloane woke early and was ready to get the day started. She had a rough plan, she just needed to start executing and filling in the blanks. Step one? Food. So, she strapped her knife back to the side of her shin and covered it with her pants. She slipped her back scabbard over her shoulder and tightened it down. Looking around one last time at the room, she walked out.

She barely stepped into the tavern area before her name was called out, “Lady Sloane! Over here!” Ser Ernald called out from a table in front of the bar. He was sitting with Sers Ismeld and Cristole. She waved and then made for the last chair at the table.

Ser Ismeld was the first to speak as she sat down, “Good morning, Lady Sloane. How are you? You missed a bit after you stepped away to sleep.”

Sloane gave Ismeld a curious look. That was probably the most she had said to her yet. Deciding to go with it, she replied. “Honestly, not well. I received news that another human, like myself, had been found dead. A man. Apparently, he had been killed by the wolves sometime in the last day.”

Ser Cristole’s eyes widened slightly, “I am sorry to hear that Lady Sloane. However, perhaps, while tragic, you should take a portion of this as good news. It means that, clearly, other members of your race besides just you and your daughter were transported to our world.”

Ser Ernald looked at Cristole in thought, “That is a good observation Cristole.” Turning to look at Sloane, he added, “If a significant number of your people have made it here, the news will spread. It may make it easier to search based on your daughter’s description and just about any leads into the ‘novel new race’ that appeared from thin air.”

She considered this line of thought, “There is potential there. It’s too early to say whether it will help, but it’s better than searching the whole continent for Gwyn with zero direction.” Looking between the three of them, she pushed, seeing how much they would tell her about the decision the night prior. “Speaking of direction, after you leave me in Thirdghyll, do you have any suggestions for where I should direct my travels next?”

Cristole sighed while Ernard covered his face with his hand. Ismeld's face scrunched up as if she were constipated. Cristole looked at Sloane, and deadpanned, "You heard it all didn't you?"

Sloane squinted her eyes, debating whether to play off the fact that she had completely failed in her tactic. She was never good at manipulating a conversation to get what she wanted. Accepting the loss, she told them the truth. "I did. However, I wasn't sure if you all would tell me. I was a bit disappointed in the decision but it makes sense, at least in hindsight. This is day three since I arrived."

Ser Ismeld made a small 'o' with her mouth, "Ah, yeah. That." She didn't say anything else, just looked away. Sloane wasn't sure she'd ever get along with that woman, but it was still early in their relationship. Who knew? She'd overcome worse odds.

Ernard peeked through his fingers, looking between all the occupants of the table. Cristole rolled his eyes, "Ernard, what are you doing?"

"Hoping you'll say something instead of relegating the task to me since we both know Ismeld won't."

Cristole looked unamused, "Well, thank you for volunteering, Ser Ernard, for explaining what the Order decided."

Ernard audibly groaned, "Fine, alright, Sloane. How much did you hear?"

Sloane raised an eyebrow, "Escorting me to Swanbrook, tossing me on a boat, and pointing to somewhere called Avera? Apparently, they have an academy that is more likely to have information than the one in Thirdghyll if that one doesn't pan out?"

Ernard nodded, "Okay, so you got most of that, and it's Avira by the way. They're a large kingdom who believe they're better than everyone else, which leads them to think they can push their opinions and laws on the rest of us."

Sloane squinted, "What did I not hear?"

"Nothing really, Melchior came finally. He talked about the situation. Their scouting parties were hit by the wolves last night, they lost six of their people. They did manage to kill

another fifteen though. So, that's a plus. It's, basically, a small attack force of... wolves. No one has even an inkling of why there are so many. It's highly unusual."

"I agree, that is frightening. It reminds me of an event from my own world." Sloane reflected. Continuing, "In a nation across the world from mine, in a cold tundra region, the winter was especially harsh. The temperature was extremely cold, and due to this, the usual prey of the local wolves was depleted drastically." She noticed they were transfixed on her as she recounted the event. "The lack of a reliable food source compelled the wolves to focus on one particular area. A town. This town was besieged by around four hundred wolves. Luckily the wolves only targeted the horses and other livestock out of hunger and desperation. In my world, the average size of a wolf pack is around ten to fifteen." Cristole looked positively shocked, while Ismeld and Ernald just sat with wide eyes.

Sloane smiled, then administered the coup de grâce, "And that doesn't even come close to the man-eating wolf attacks from eighty years before that. Where, in the same nation, over two hundred packs of wolves terrorized a city intermittently for over ten years. Hunting and devouring mainly children that walked the streets alone or even in small groups. Over the course of four years, over two-thousand wolves were killed."

She had them. Cristole looked completely speechless, just opening and closing his mouth as if he couldn't figure out exactly what he wanted to say. Ernald too just sat there shocked. Ismeld was the first to come to, "Your world sounds so terrifying."

Sloane eye's widened slightly, realizing that she may have gone too far. "These were very peculiar circumstances, which is why I mentioned them. Something is agitating these wolves. They're larger than normal; more aggressive." She looked at Cristole, "Was there anything out of the ordinary when you stripped down the wolves we had killed?"

Cristole thought about it, snapping his finger he exclaimed, "Yes! There was! I'll be right back." He hopped up and rushed upstairs.

Ismeld spoke for him, "We found something peculiar, something in each of the wolves' chests." She paused, looking up as she considered how to explain. "At first, we thought it was a weird growth, but it was hardening in our hands. There were a bunch of nerves branching out from it. However, as we grabbed a hold of it, the nerves seemed to just fall away."

She thought for a moment then added, “ Further, when we touched it, it seemed to spread a feeling of... I can’t quite describe it... tingling? It was definitely a strange experience. It seemed to also react to the knives. The feeling seemed to travel through the hilts into our hands.”

Sloane was about to respond when Cristole came charging back down the stairs, leaping down the last five. She smiled, the sight of the tall, elf with his angular jaw and long sharp ears with the body of an athlete in this super-excited state amused her. His normally calm, stoic demeanor missing as he held up what looked like a rough orb about the size of a golf ball.

“This is it. When we found the first one, it felt like any other organ. It was slowly hardening but that sped up once we removed it from the wolf. Now it feels like a stone.” handing the petrified... organ... to her, he sat down and looked at her expectantly.

She palpated the orb, feeling for soft areas or something that would signify where the nerves Ismeld described would connect. “Oh, okay. Wow. This is really strange. It’s almost as if nothing had been attached to it when it was in the body. I can definitely feel something from it too.”

Looking up, Cristole was nodding, “I know! It’s fascinating, the growth was in the exact same location on each wolf, just like you would expect any other organ.”

She placed it on the table in front of her and stared at it, thinking. Ernard drew her attention, “Sloane.” She looked up at him as he pointed at her wrist. “Your watch. Look.”

She looked at the device and noticed the mist collecting on the side closest to the orb, taking on a slight green tinge to it at the very edge. She moved her wrist until the watch was just over the object, causing the mist to move back into the center, more of it turning green.

“You’re right about one thing. Fascinating. The... core... is emanating magic. A magic core? No, that’s not right. This is probably what’s causing the wolves to be so large.” Handing the core back, Sloane considered the implications, mind trying to think of multiple things at once. Barely able to formulate a complete idea.

While she was formulating a plan, the others spoke, their conversation barely registering to her. “I think we lost her. She’s going to think herself to death.” Cristole chuckled.

Ernald shook his head, “Just because *one* of us cannot utilize their mind, doesn’t mean the rest of us are also incapable.”

“Sloane, what’s on your mind?” When she didn’t respond, Ismeld waved her hand in front of Sloane’s face, surprising her. “You all there?”

“Yes, of course. What was the question?” Sloane asked.

Ismeld sighed, “What are you thinking about?”

“Oh, yes.” Sloane straightened her back. “So, this, we’re going to call it a core, I suspect it is what allows the magic that is everywhere to improve the wolf. Or anything, I cannot verify for obvious reasons, but I suspect that we have one of these as well.”

The others looked both surprised and skeptical at her revelation, Ernald narrowed his eyes in thought. “Explain.”

Sloane nodded, “It all goes back to how each of us felt after we killed the wolves. We felt a rush, and now there is a minuscule but noticeable improvement in our bodies. I believe that was *our* cores taking on the magic from the wolves. and then distributing it within us.”

Ernald crossed his arms and started stroking his chin, considering. “This has merit, the implications are, frankly, terrifying, however. This would mean that each of us was physically changed by the blue flash of magic.”

Sloane nodded again, “Yes. This is huge. Perhaps we can perform an autopsy on someone? I am unsure of the specifics. I do believe this merits additional investigation though. I believe this core is what allows us to utilize magic. If anything, Maud lends credence to this as she clearly utilized magic.”

Cristole tapped his chin then lifted his finger, “If we do have this core, that means any of us could learn magic? I did not see Maud’s magic, but I can see the effects on Ser Ernald’s face.”

Ismeld, who had been staring at her hands, looked up. “If the cores allow us to do magic, and the cores are still filled with magic, could we do something with them?”

“Actually, let me try something.” She said as she pulled out her knife. “So, I know you mentioned it, but I want to see how this feels myself.” Touching the blade to the core, she tried to feel it in the hilt.

Concentrating, she focused on the core, moving the blade so the flat of it was resting on the object. Slowly, she started feeling something, definitely a force of some sort. It reminded her of... nature or maybe life. It was very strange, and she knew it was definitely magic. It made her excited, thinking of ways to use the core.

Sloane's eyes widened, remembering something from her world's fantasy stories and ideas, “Wait, is there a blacksmith nearby?” Cristole nodded his head. “Then yes, I definitely think there is something we may be able to do. I may need money, but can we head there now?”

Ernald looked around, “But you haven't even eaten!”

Sloane glanced at his plate which still had a hunk of bread and a couple of pieces of cheese. She smiled and snatched them up as she stood. Taking a bite, she said. “Now I have. Let's go!”

Cristole laughed as he stood up. “Sure, let's go. We have some money we can use, just please make sure it's for a good cause! Ser Gisele will kill me if you spend it all for nothing!”