

## I Ain't Afraid of No Ghost

As the caravan moved south to bypass the besieged Goosebourne, Tiberius pinpointed increased signs of activity. The falcon had proven its worth by assisting the group in avoiding three sets of patrols, unfortunately, it seemed that the luck would not hold.

The forces from the Empire of Vlaredia had moved in heavily, and the knights were not sure how everyone had managed to miss it.

“There is no way they were able to bypass Dheg Malduhr so easily. It would have been able to hold the pass for years without support. Sloane, did the man from the order say anything else?” Cristole said.

Nemura looked surprised from where she sat next to Sloane. “I knew you received information from somewhere, but them?”

Sloane nodded. “Yes, Giallo gave us the information I used to warn Captain Jorin. I do not think the man will hold a grudge, but he specifically told me to only inform Guildmaster Romaris.”

Nemura took a deep breath and her eyes narrowed as she realized what was left out of Sloane's words.

Sloane looked over at Cristole. “Nothing. They obviously knew the army was meant to make its way through the pass. He didn't mention anything about them *actually* accomplishing it.”

The high elf shook his head. “I have no idea how they could have managed to even make it through the pass with such a large force. They then somehow also managed to make it all the way to besiege Goosebourne without Westaren even knowing.”

“At least they know now,” Gisele said.

“For all of the good it will do them,” Cristole added with a scoff.

“You did say that this ‘Giallo’ mentioned that the crown had mobilized an army. Perhaps the true reason for such was not just to stop the monsters, but to discourage any actions of the Empire,” Nemura said.

Gisele nodded. “That is possible. Your kingdom is—”

“A mess,” Stefan said from behind Sloane.

Sloane sighed. “This is all fascinating, but it does not help us right now. What are we going to do tomorrow? We’re going to run into at least one squad of troops.”

Gisele shrugged. “We stick to the plan and hope for the best. We will handle it if they prove belligerent. Hopefully, they understand that we are not from here.”

“I believe we should have Lady Ismeld ride with Lady Sloane tomorrow in her wagon. No offense to your order, but it’s a bit better equipped for two nobles. I will drive it, and Nemura can ride the wagon with Koren. Then the remaining members of House Reinhart can ride inside the knight’s wagon as well,” Stefan suggested.

Gisele nodded. “That is a good idea. We’ll continue as if we are employed by House Reinhart. We need to ensure everyone keeps cool heads. We act the part, and it should be fine. Hopefully with no more than some toll or fee.”

“Is it common in these situations to obtain documents from them that will allow us past any other troops we run into?” Sloane asked.

Cristole shook his head. “That is not a common thing unless it’s through their actual front lines. With luck, we will only have to make our way past one group. We *are* moving away from the front. That is another thing we can claim. We had no idea we were near any front lines and wish to avoid the war.”

“With how secretive they managed to keep their movements, that is believable,” Stefan said.

“Good. We have a plan. The order will split off into two shifts for maintaining an outer watch. Guardswoman Nemura, could you and Stefan please split as well?”

“We will do that, Ser Gisele,” Nemura said.

With a nod, both knights stood up and made to walk back toward their wagon. Sloane got up and rushed behind them. “Gisele? Cristole?”

They stopped and turned around. She tilted her head, her eyes flicking back and forth between them. “Why are you separating yourselves?”

Cristole turned and pointedly stared at Gisele, gesturing as he did. Gisele took a deep breath and looked at Sloane. “Walk with me?”

Sloane nodded and fell into step with the woman as they walked to the edge of the camp. The camp sat on a hill next to the road that dipped down before it continued south. All around them was nothing except hilly grasslands with sparse trees that lined a small creek that snaked in between the hills. She knew that in the distance there was a forest that they had to avoid. Cristole had asked her to send Tiberius to scout it and she had seen evidence of monsters within, along with strange concentrations of mana visible to the naked eye. She wanted to investigate them but knew that such an expedition would be very dangerous.

The two of them stood there and looked out into the twilight upon the plains. The first bit of frost was starting to settle during the night. It seemed winter would soon be upon them. Gisele seemed to hesitate so Sloane nudged her. “What’s wrong? Why are you avoiding me?”

Gisele sighed and rubbed her arms together, her breath visible as the woman exhaled. “I realized that we were becoming too attached. Ernard is already considering staying in Marketbol with Adaega. The woman has traumas that will likely never heal, and he has been doing what he can to help her. He believes she needs someone she is comfortable with for a while longer.”

She sighed again, her eyes searching the darkening horizon as if the answer she was searching for lay beyond. “He says he isn’t sure, but we know. That man was never meant to be one who traveled all over the world fighting other people’s battles in search of some lost glory and honor. That made us... me realize that we lost our way. We came here searching for something that was missing, only to find—”

She turned her head and looked Sloane in the eyes. “We found you. With you, we found an entirely new world it seems.” Gisele flexed her fist, a shimmering of red energy surrounding it, and traveled up her arm creating a thin shield that reminded her of something out of science fiction. “This is all so new. It’s also something we need to take back to our home. They need to know about all of this.”

Sloane nodded. "I understand. I am truly grateful for all you have done for me."

She stepped closer to the woman and put her arm around Gisele's shoulders. "You guys are my friends. It's not goodbye. It's just a 'see you later'. We still have months together. Let's make the best of it, yeah? I am sure there is much more we can figure out together. Plus, I still need to figure out a way to give Ismeld magic."

Gisele snorted and nudged her with a shoulder. "You have *no* idea. That woman has been insufferable in training. I expected her to point out you being wrong long before now."

Sloane smiled. "Ah yes, the old 'I told you so'. Of course, it's a universal concept. I guess I deserve that. I... I tend to get caught up in my projects. Has anyone else been showing magic use?"

"I figured out how to use mana to strengthen myself and my attacks. Deryk and Ismeld have as well," she said.

"That's a *type* of magic. Eh? Eh?" she said, squeezing Gisele's shoulder.

"If she can't make magical shields or shoot purple orbs of exploding death, she won't be swayed. I know Ismeld wants it desperately, she has trained incessantly since departing the city."

Sloane sighed and pulled her arm back. "I'll figure something out. I owe her. Especially after Thirdghyll."

She lifted a hand and formed several orbs of arcane energy. Letting them orbit each other, as she stared into the soft light they emitted. Considering what she could do to help Ismeld.

Gisele placed a hand on her forearm. "You do not. You fought together, as warriors should. That woman trusts you. She'll appreciate anything you do, but she'll simply show it in her own way. She feels inadequate right now. J-Just do not tell her I told you."

Sloane shook her head. "I won't, but I will come up with something. Then she'll have until I see you all again to become the biggest badass fighter in the world."

Gisele laughed. "That will never happen."

She raised a brow and looked at the orkun woman. “Why not?”

Her friend puffed her chest out. “Because that is clearly me!”

Sloane snorted.

“I’m glad we’re friends, Gisele. Just don’t pull away again. I’ll have to kick your ass.”

Gisele reached over and squeezed her arm. “I won’t. I’m sorry. Come on. Let’s go make fun of Cristole.”

The woman turned away, and Sloane smirked. “You know, making fun of him doesn’t hide the fact that you like him. You know everyone knows, right?”

Gisele froze. “Who is gonna kick whose ass, again?” The shielding spread out around the woman’s entire form, giving her an almost spectral look with the hazy energy tinted with a light red hue.

Sloane lightly punched Gisele’s shielded arm. “I ain’t afraid of no ghost! Wait—*Shit. Gisele! Stay away!*” She dodged the woman’s hand that swatted at her and ran toward the other knights, laughing the entire way.

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Commander Ressa walked into the command tent, her second a step behind her. The general’s presence was expected, but with so few attendants and others was not. The man looked up from the map he was examining and at her as she entered. His bushy grey brows scrutinized her with the same level of attentiveness that he was giving the effects in front of him.

“Commander, thank you for joining me.”

She looked around, taking note of the others in the room then came to a stop in front of the man and saluted.

“General, am I early? I was not expecting a... private meeting,” she said, giving her second a glance, who gave her a small shake of his head. *Hmm. He thought the same as I did.*

“This should be quick, Commander. I have been looking for opportunities to assist you with your mission for my cousin, and I think I found one,” he explained.

The old general was notably a second cousin of the empress and was appointed to his current position due to his loyalty to her. This did not mean he was any less effective at his role. General Razane was a highly skilled tactician who was selected for both his ability to command an army and his ability to maintain operational security. Those with loyalties to other Clans or Houses may be tempted to report back to them on their movements. Especially when the Empress herself planned this prong of their assault into the Sovereign lands.

After several secret envoys, the Empress had planned a suitable bribe for the dwarves of Dheg Malduhr to utilize their pass. They had all felt the event before arriving, the ground shaking and flash of light emitting from just over the mountains, and they had entered the entryway to the pass on guard. When the army arrived and found the ruins of the city, it—while horrific—provided a boon they could not ignore. The army had saved who they could and then sent for specialists to assist the survivors—of which there were few.

She looked down at the map he was examining, trying to see what he meant. The disposition of his troops was marked by little figures. Another small figure was placed on a road that bypassed Goosebourne; it was heading straight for two separate groups. The first was a light cavalry detachment that had been sent ahead to create a checkpoint and hopefully catch any fleeing from the siege. The second was a more recent addition that was sent ahead to build a small watch tower at a key intersection in the merchant road.

He pointed at the small figure. “Here, my scouts have been tracking this group here. They have been avoiding Goosebourne and my troops rather effectively. They never came within sight of the city so I am inclined to let them go, but they will be stopped pending your arrival.

“Who are they?”

“I am not sure, they have been effective—to an almost excessive amount, mind you—at avoiding any patrols. Only two squads have even *seen* them from a distance, but none have gotten close enough to stop them. They will meet the light cavalry I have set up here tomorrow. They have orders to waylay any group that comes upon them.”

Ressa nodded, following along. “How does this assist in my mission?”

General Razane pointed at the second group. “That will give you time to get here. Pass orders to the unit there to let the wagons go, then head southwest. Set up a believable way for them to come upon you naturally. Then pay to join their caravan. That should get you into the Sovereign Cities with little scrutiny. You just need to make sure they come upon you, not the other way around.”

She looked up at the man. *That... Is a surprisingly good plan.* “I think we can make that work. Thank you for your assistance, General. This was outside what was requested of you, and I am sure Her Highness will be pleased,” she said.

He chuckled ruefully. “This is my last campaign. There is no need to expound my usefulness to my cousin. Just make sure you get what she needs. I know I do not command you, but if you could send a runner with any information that would affect my men... I would appreciate it.”

She nodded slowly. “I understand. I will keep an ear and eye out for anything that may affect your forces, here.”

“That is all I ask, Commander.” He turned and one of the aides moved forward with a scroll case. General Razane grabbed it and then handed it to her. “These are the orders for the watch tower. Please pass it to them on your way through.”

She turned and handed the case to her second then gestured toward the door. The man nodded and quickly exited the tent. Commander Ressa scrutinized the little figure once more, then looked up at the General who stood silently watching her.

“We will prepare and move out tonight.” She reached out her hand. “For the glory of the Ror, General.”

Razane grasped her wrist. “And the longing of Vlaredia skies, Commander. Be safe, and return with honor.”

Ressa gave the man a curt nod. *We have a way in. Now to take advantage of it.*

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Sloane sat with Ismeld in her wagon as the caravan moved toward where Tiberius had seen a few scouts camped out the night prior. The woman seemed calm, but Sloane knew she was ready to go charging out of the door into action. It was obvious in the woman's body language that she was a bit on edge. She bounced a knee and tapped against her other leg with a finger while looking toward the small window to her right.

Sloane sighed. "Ismeld. Relax. Everything will be fine. There were only four men. They will let us by after Gisele shows all of our documents."

The elven woman looked at her. "I know it will be fine. I am just... I am at war with my thoughts currently."

Sloane lifted a brow. "At war with your thoughts, Ismeld? Really?"

"Yes. I do not wish to discuss it," she said.

Shrugging, Sloane said, "Alright. Then don't."

"I will not."

"Fine."

The woman shifted and pointedly looked out of the window, for a moment before shifting back. "Gisele told me about your talk."

"Oh?"

"Yes. What else were you wrong about?"

Sloane sighed. It seemed the woman had wanted the ability to use magic more than she had known. "I don't know what I don't know, Ismeld. It's always been nothing but theories and experimenting. I heard you got *something*."

Ismeld's eyes narrowed. "It is not the same."

"Ismeld, you are a brilliant swordswoman. What does it help you do?"



The woman tilted her head. “I feel a surge of energy and can react more quickly and my movements are more fluid. I don’t know how but I know it is **Arcane Control**. I felt what was almost a click in my mind and knowledge of what it was and its function filled me,” she explained.

Sloane nodded. “I have always felt something similar when I learned new things. You focus and push your intent on what you want to happen, pulling at mana as you do. Mana then fills you to perform the function you want. It doesn’t always work, but I know that every time I *really* pushed myself, it has. My **Runic Knowledge** is a good example of this, I know more about the runes I work with than I have any right of knowing. It’s like mana is giving us these—”

Her eyes shot open. *No. There’s no way.*

She channeled mana, feeling it fill her. Sloane looked around. “Menu.” She paused. “Screens. Status. System... *Framework?*”

Ismeld looked confused. “What are these things? Are you ill, Sloane? Should I get Maud?”

Sloane squinted as she thought. *Why didn’t I see it before? How do I test this? Think.*

She blinked as Ismeld snapped her fingers in front of her. “I am getting Maud. Are you having a... what was it you called it? A stroke?”

Sloane narrowed her eyes. “I’m fine, Ismeld. I just had a revelation that is both world-shattering and making me question... everything.”

The high elf just crossed her arms. “Dramatic much?”

*What if this is just some simulation? Am I hooked up to some computer?*

“You wouldn’t understand. There is no parallel in this world.”

Ismeld gave her a look. “Are you calling me stupid?”

Sloane jerked her head back. “What? No. What?” *Oh.*

Ismeld must have noticed her expression because she huffed a laugh. “Good. I know you did not mean anything by it. Please, explain your thoughts. You were nearly spiraling there.”

Sloane considered how to respond, then decided to just keep it simple instead of launching into a long drawn-out explanation as was her instinct. “This whole time I’ve known mana has *intent*. What if that *intent* is because there is an underlying system guiding everything? These spells? Your *ability*? Could it all be a part of this system?”

“System? You mean like one of your computers?”

Sloane groaned. *Of course. They have no true concept of the idea.* “Yes. Essentially.”

“You believe mana is controlled by a computer?”

*Is it? No. The cores aren’t technology. They’re organic.*

“I don’t believe so. I have zero way of testing this.” *Wait.*

She looked down at her watch and had an idea. Sloane pushed mana into it, trying to give a general idea of the intent she wanted. Nothing was happening so she pulled more blue mana, filling her with as much as she could then pushed it into the watch with one thought. *Show me my attributes!*

The usual swirl of mana appeared, but this time... it moved and formed a shape. It looked like a rough scalene triangle. She glanced up at Ismeld who was watching her intently. “What did you call your ability?”

**“Arcane Control.”**

“Control.” *Is one of these points, control? What are the other two points then? Why can’t it just list the damn things? Hmm...*

She pushed more mana, focusing on her intent. *Tell me my–*

A bang at the wall made her jump and she lost all of her focus. The small shutter opened and Stefan’s head poked through. “There’s a group ahead. They’ve set up a checkpoint. Be ready, Miladies.”

Ismeld thanked the raithe and pushed on her glove inserts then her gauntlets. Sloane looked down at her watch, seeing it swirling with the usual mist as it searched for mana use.

“It is so fascinating to watch you in these moments. Grand revelations usually follow,” Ismeld said quietly. Sloane ignored her.

*So close, it's something though. I have attributes, and one has to do with my control.*

She was lost in her thoughts when Ismeld spoke again. “Sloane. It's time.”

Sighing, Sloane looked up and, too focused inward to respond verbally, nodded. Now to just figure out what it meant.

*Just one more thing for the list.*