

Session 6

Embarking on an expedition!

Rua badgers Treasa during the preparations, constantly asking "Are we ready? Can we leave yet?" Treasa bears it with her characteristic stoicism. Soren goes to Kinbal and asks him what would horses love that Hillfolk do not have ready access to. Kinbal goes to the storehouse and convinces Honoured Dove to add a sack of carrots to the handcart of basic goods for trade. It joins bags of potatoes and barley flour. Old Esme approaches Treasa with a crow on her shoulder. Esme gives the bird to Treasa and says "This is Eysa, queen of crows! If needed you can strap a note to her leg and send word back to me." Esme gives the bird a nudge and it flies to Treasa's shoulder. Treasa jumps a little but settles down with a small shrug.

As the group is preparing to leave Eliam arrives with several large bundles of firewood and adds them to the cart, making what looked like a very reasonable load much larger. Rua is still asking if its time to leave and Treasa looks at Soren. He takes stock of the party, counting all 5 heads and quickly takes inventory of the contents of the cart. After a moment he signals everything is ready and they move out. Leaving early in the morning the party's journey starts uneventful. After a few hours they reach the crossroads. The enchantment of the maker's road is here too, but it is not a place to linger long. Rua turns to Soren and Kiva and asks "How do these roads work? The stones are so large!". Soren looks to Kiva and she shares that she read a book that detailed a broken paving stone that had runes inscribed on the bottom side that contribute to the safety spell that protects travellers on the road. She also says that the Stone Lords are thought to be responsible for their creation.

They continue on and as the sun goes down they come across one of the wide stone circles made of the same paving stones as the road. Rua turns to Soren and asks if this is where they will camp tonight. Soren agrees and clears his throat before directing Kiva to start a fire and asks Treasa to walk around the perimeter with him to make sure its safe. Kiva pulls out a flint and some tinder, enthusiastically striking sparks until she has a merry little fire going. Rua pulls out some sheep jerky and shares it around and everyone eats their fill. After dinner they discuss watch rotations and settle down to spend some time together. Kiva asks the group if they have much experience being outside Stonetop. Rua shares that he doesn't remember much about Gordin's Delve but he would love to go back. Soren warns him against this, sharing some of his poor experiences with the town guards. Kiva talk about how she would love to visit the Forge Lords ruins and what she might discover there. As the fire burns low the conversation gets more personal and Kiva shares that she is afraid she will never be able to make an impact on the world. All she has done is read her books and study, but she is only one person. She wants to discover ancient magics and gain power to be able to protect her loved ones.

At some point the topic of hobbies comes up and Soren shares his efforts to learn woodcraft from Fio. While their conversation winds on there is a friendly game of Maker's Road with stakes being some shiny stones they found along the way. Throughout the day Rua had noticed that Treasa has been very observant of the group, always making sure they are staying together like a herding dog almost. He can tell she feels very protective of everyone.

Back at Stonetop, Esme has been finishing her weaving of enchantment on her shield. She spends a chunk of time singing while she works, following one of the accounts in the Chronicle on how to infuse the essence of a story into the shield in order to ward back luck and turn spells. In addition, she has been co-ordinating with the homesteads around Stonetop. There is an informal union of the farmers, where they come together to share resources and support and that is her main point of contact. None of the farms are within easy walking distance of Stonetop, the grasses of the flatlands are extremely tenacious and resist any attempt to tame them. Esme recalls a story of a scholar from Marshedge that came to the flatlands to study the grasses and try to domesticate and/or clear an area to make it suitable for farming. They were able to clear a small area using controlled fires and cutting away the grass. However, as time went on they developed a hoarse cough. It got worse and worse until they started to cough up bits of grass and realized the plants had taken root in their lungs. Not long after they suffocated due to this infection, and this story has warded off any further attempts to settle the flatlands.

In the evening before dinner Esme is sitting in the Pavilion of the Gods with Angrad, picking her mind for old stories that may have forgotten wisdom. The conversation is interrupted by shouting coming from outside. "Get your spears! We have an intruder!" comes the call, and she can tell they are running to the stairs. She heads there as well and sees a circle of villagers standing warily around a bloodied and bedraggled man who appears to have crawled up the stairs from the forest. As Esme gets closer she can see he is covered in black Crinwin blood, it is covering his large and burly frame. The villagers are on edge, Esme needs to be wary not only of the stranger but for any of the villagers acting rashly. Esme calls for one of the villagers to fetch Honoured Stella and tells the rest of the villagers to hold steady, he is covered in Crinwin blood, not the blood of humans. She asks him what his business is "Oh you know, it's been a rough couple of days in the forest. Does Treasa still live here?" Esme replies asking for his name, saying it is customary to introduce oneself before asking about others. He introduces himself as Willem, and when Esme presses him for where he is from he says "Willem of the Tired and Hungry" with a smirk.

Old Esme welcomes him into the village and offers him food and drink. The villagers around him have relaxed now that someone is taking charge of the situation. Willem bears an iron-banded club slung over his back in addition to decent armour and some other weapons. He drinks deeply of the water and uses some to wash his hands and face. He sighs and remarks that the Crinwin seem to be more numerous and bolder. Esme asks again where he is from, and why he is so keen on meeting Treasa. "Look lady you look like you have a kind heart and a good soul. I really appreciate that, and I don't want to lie to you. If you don't ask I won't have to lie. I have business with Treasa, I don't want to cause trouble. If she is not here I can wait." Esme tells him that Treasa is not here, but should be back in a week or less. She invites him to stay in a spare hut and if he helps with the work around the village he can eat and drink his fill. Now that the blood is washed from his face he looks terrible, like he hasn't in days. Esme asks one more question, looking deeply into Willem's eyes, "Do you mean any ill will towards Treasa?" He answers no, but through the

power of Aratis she feels there are things he is hiding. After this she shows him to the hut and goes to bed herself.

The expedition spends the night uneventfully, Rua and Treasa appear to be energetic and happy but Soren spent the night stressing about his responsibilities and Kiva is not used to sleeping on a bed of stone. Soren is a bit cajoling, getting people up and packed so they can set out quickly. He asks Rua to help him with the cart, each of them taking one of the handles to move the cart more quickly. Eliam has been helping as well, and all their hands are rough with the effort of pulling the cart over the large paving stones. Rua sees Eliam as a challenge and does his best to work just as hard, pushing to prove himself. Eliam isn't super chatty but bears a companionable silence. At noon they stop to rest and gnaw on some jerky. In the afternoon Eysa, queen of crows, flies from Treasa's shoulder and goes to join a murder of crows that are circling something a bows shot away from the road. Soren is torn, his instinct pushes him to investigate, this is the fun of the road getting into interesting encounters. However he can hear Esme's voice in his mind, reminding him of his responsibility to keep the others safe and leaving the road is definitely not safe. His indecision is interrupted by Rua saying "I'm gonna go look!" and he dashes into the grass towards the crows. Soren cries out asking him to come back, but quickly decides that they should stick together and motions for the others to follow Rua into the grass.

Rua pushes through the grasses and comes to a trampled area, finding a handful of human corpses and one horse. They are not a pretty sight, scavengers have been at work here. They are at least a couple days old. Rua is sickened by the sight, but quickly starts looking around for anything that might be useful or valuable. He finds some broken spears and salvages the iron spearheads but nothing else, the bodies have already been looted. As he searches he can tell that this appears to be a skirmish between tribes of Hillfolk, with one of the bodies having multiple Hillfolk arrows sticking out of it. He also finds one of the bodies has a nasty burn all along its back like an intense flame was pressed against him. The strange thing is, the bodies have been looted but not cared for. The Hillfolk have rituals about death, they believe that those you kill deserve at least a brief funeral to make sure their spirits do not come back to haunt them. The others enter the area, and Soren goes to look at the corpses. He can tell based on the spear markings that they are of the Yellow Spear tribe, Garnuss' tribe. He is not among the bodies though, so Soren makes use of his fledgling woodcraft skills to find a trail moving to the south east. There is also some very fine tack on the horse, a saddle blanket that has been carefully woven and decorated around the fringe.

Soren takes the time to arrange the bodies gracefully, arranging them in a row and placing their hands folded on their chests. Following the tradition of the Hillfolk he sprinkles some dirt over them and says "May your spirits find their way to the final door and find peace in the life beyond." There is some discussion about what to do next, but it is decided that they are not prepared for direct conflict and should keep to the goal. They go back to the road and make it to titan bones late in the afternoon.

Back at Stonetop there is a lot of chatter about the visitor, everyone curious about who they are and what they are doing here. One of the village kids, Trix, goes to the Chronicle and lets Esme know that Mairwyn is looking for her. Esme fusses over her hair and tells her the story of how Mairwyn got their name. Trix leads Esme to Mairwyn's house, and as they arrive Mairwyn fusses about setting out some tea with bread and butter. Honoured Cutha is there too with a tired

expression. "Ah Esme, glad you could make it. We have been talking and you have just been in the forest fighting off Crinwin and Faeries and came home safe. Myself and the other elders have been talking and..." Mairwyn interrupts him "You have no apprentice and who know how long you will last! What if you had not come back, we have a cave full of writing and without you, nobody to read them!" Esme reassures them she has her eye on a potential apprentice but it is too soon to make a call. Mairwyn holds up her arthritic hands and says "I am not getting any younger and neither are you! Can you at least decide by the end of the season?" Esme hums and haws for a moment and says that may be too early to pin it down but she will be closer to a decision by then. Cutha says he admires her judicious nature and trusts her judgment, but it is Time that is forcing her hand not them. He urges her to think about it, who knows what might happen in the coming year.

End Session!

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