

In his dreams, King Arthur and his knights have decided to take a tour of the lands beyond England to see the natural wonders of the great wilds. They bring with them an esteemed Guide, who is known throughout the British Isles for his most excellent narrations of scenes of the wilderness.

“As we travel from place to place,” announced the Guide, speaking over the *clop-clop* of their horses’ hooves, “remember that each scene we shall encounter – every beast, plant, rock, and lake – is, in its own way, beautiful. We are surrounded by beauty! And if you cannot see it from one side, you may very well try looking at things another way. Keep looking, and I assure you, the beauty of each tree, each bird, each cliff, speaks to the imaginative powers of its creator.”

Arthur nodded solemnly from the horse behind him.

“Mm, yes, praise be to God for all His mighty works.”

There was a general murmur of assent and “amen” from the row of knights.

The Guide was confused for just a moment, before he understood.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, “Yes, that too, that too.”

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Their first stop, where they set up camp, was near a river, on a sloped embankment where thick, white trees stood with naked monolithic trunks in a crisp military formation next to a row of their darker, more scattered counterparts.

“There,” said the Guide, pointing into the thicket of darker fauna, “off in the distance, half a dozen gazelles, in all their grazing glory.”

“Why that’s a rather curious pile of rocks they’re standing near, quite interesting with all those holes drilled in every which way.”

“Yes,” replied the Guide, “the males among these creatures will sometimes tackle the rocks to prove their physical prowess. It is perhaps a less violent form of showmanship than much of the animal kingdom.”

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The group stopped for lunch under the shade of a triangular overhang, next to the dark form of group of alien-looking plants, with thin, metallic trunks, and sharp, curving branches that reached into the sky, defying natural explanation. A trio of similarly dark ravens sat quietly on one of branches, seemingly eyeing the band of intruders. Or their food.

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The afternoon was spent traveling across a great plain, where the knights encounter yet another row of the pale trees.

Sir Benjamin Bitdiddle leaned up against one of the trees, shading his eyes against the sun as he peered off into the distance.

“Our third location! Stop number three! At two-fifteen in the afternoon, and exactly two – a pair! – of cheetahs, next to what must be the most geometrically-shaped pile of stone I ever did see.”

“The Geometric Anomaly – a geological conundrum that has hounded our best natural philosophers for decades,” explained the Guide. “But though it confuses those of us from England, the locals use it to teach their scholars mathematics. The triangular piece off to the right... the circular shapes to the left... one wonders what genius it was that created this.”

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Their next stop took them underneath another cliff overhang, where the knights beheld yet another plant, which might have been the elder, more refined cousin of the one they saw at noon. This one had broad, thick leaves that were alternately sharp and rounded. A large rock next to the cliff face lent itself to be a good spot for the king to sit and observe the curious fauna, where two swallows darted to and fro between the leaves.

“Local legend says that this tree protects the comings and goings of the local wildlife by diverting gusts of wind from the river, making it easier for them to build nests in the rows of caves to the left. It seems too good to be just chance does it not?”

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“What’s that off to the right?” exclaimed Sir Lancelot, “It must be the strangest rock formation I’ve ever seen! Colors and shapes in no discernable pattern jutting from the ground and towering high above us!”

The Guide waved him off.

“That, good sir knight, is a matter we shall not discuss now. One could devote an entire trip just to that formation. Many an explorer has wandered into those caves of steel, never to be seen again. Those who do come back often emerge years later with a dazed expression, wearing nothing but black robes and a squared-off hat. A truly frightful occurrence.”

He pointed instead to the south.

*"That* is what we are here for."

"A pile of sticks!" exclaimed Arthur, gawking at the haphazardly-strewn-together cluster of thick tree limbs in the middle of the clearing. Five savannah sparrows hopped around lightly from limb to limb. "Just what kind of safari is this?"

The Guide grumbled.

*"Some people* would pay good money to see the beauty that I am pointing out to these men..." he muttered. "But perhaps they need to see things from another angle, and with another focus."

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The next destination was a ways off. The knights were surprised to finally see some of the local tribesmen, after thinking the area mostly deserted.

"The sixth stop. Stop number six," proclaimed Sir Benjamin. "Four trees. One, two, three, four, and five! Five giraffes!"

The Guide waited, but Sir Benjamin had little else to say.

"Good sir, you've counted all the things in the scene before you, and yet you've missed the most important part!"

Benjamin stared at him, his eyebrows furrowing.

"The fact that the trees are chained! The locals are expressing their rejection of the ways of the wild in their headlong rush to embrace modernity! This country is an anthropologist's dream! If only these tribesmen could speak English, rather than their barbarous tongue."

He shook his head.

"I thought this was a safari?" asked King Arthur, scratching his head with his lance.

The guide threw his hands up in exasperation.

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"The last stop," said the Guide dejectedly.

The group was standing now in the middle of an almost rectangular crater, with high walls all around them. A few boulders had seemingly fallen into the crater, and stacked themselves

neatly into three piles. Wind and rain had worn away at the rougher edges of these rocks, leaving them smooth and rounded.

The knights wandered around the crater, more interested in the crater walls than the piles that the Guide had pointed them to. Sir Benjamin was the only one who was looking at the piles, but, finding that he could not easily count the number of rocks in them, instead decided to count the number of scorpions. There were seven. The third obliged to hold still to let the fascinated knight count its scales.

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“Haven’t we been here before already?” asked King Arthur. “Why, it’s the same twisted tree we saw before – the smaller of the two anyhow.”

“Stop number eight. Or number two. Whichever you prefer,” said Benjamin. “And there are the three ravens we saw before.”

“Good God, my dear sir knight!” exclaimed the Guide, “not everything is about numbers! These places have names! People worked hard to explore all the places we’ve seen today – it is only fitting that we call them by the names of their discoverers. And besides, this second walk around is a good opportunity to see not only the tree in front, but to also focus on the rock face behind it.”

Benjamin thought about this for a moment.

“One of the ravens is named Alyssa. She told me herself during lunch.”

The Guide covered his face with his hands, dragging them down slowly with a great, heaving sigh.

“Sir knights,” he said finally, “it is my duty as a safari guide to ensure that you appreciate the wonders of our natural world. Perhaps I was not doing as good of a job as I should have before. We *will* make it back to camp, but before we do, we shall take a more... scenic route back. It will give us all an opportunity to see some things from a different point of view, which would also let us appreciate the environment of where we have been standing. See some of the background scenery, as it were.”

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The knights continued on their wandering path back to camp, passing by the other side of the chained trees, where they beheld the rock face behind the trees that they stood near earlier. Two of the giraffes had left the clearing, leaving three of the beasts still there, blinking slowly at the odd English visitors.

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They made their way again to the cluster of reddish tree limbs, where the sun was now setting to their left, behind the colorful rock formation. A single sparrow called out into the sunset as the knights squinted at the scene as a whole, trying to figure out the meaning of all of it. They had, after all, paid good money for the safari.

“I had neglected to mention,” said the Guide with a sigh, “The caves behind the wonderful red occurrence are by the locals as a war room to develop strategies to fight a great evil.”

But at this point, he wasn’t really sure the knights were even paying attention.

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A quick return to the crater saw the knights poking around at the piles of rocks again.

“Now you must see these piles in the context of the crater itself,” said the Guide, patting a wall fondly with one hand. “This was discovered 65 years ago by the intrepid explorer-” but there the guide stopped speaking as he realized that none of Sir Arthur’s knights were listening.

Sir Benjamin counted only six scorpions this time, and neither he nor any of the other men knew enough about craters and walls and rock piles to know much of what their guide was talking about.

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They crossed the plains once more, circling such that the pale trees they stood under in the afternoon were far off in the distance. A herd of eight cheetahs loped towards them, likely to the river for an evening drink.

“It is important to remember, gentlemen,” said the Guide, “that many of the scenes we are observing today were not like this at all not too long ago. Take those trees for example.” He pointed off to the north. “That entire row is only perhaps a hundred years old. This was a very, very different place some time ago.”

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It was early evening by the time they reached the larger of the two dark plants again, now nearing the camp where they would spend the night. The two African swallows from before were now joined by a trio of chicks, poking their heads out from behind the broad, thick leaves of the plant. Now that they were no longer under the overhang, the knights realized that behind the large stone where they had sat before was a rock wall covered in a grid-like pattern.

“I do apologize for not mentioning this earlier,” said the Guide, gesturing at the markings on the wall. “Here, we had passed by the former rock dwellings of a tribe of alchemists. Local rumor says that these markings are used to calculate the ingredients needed for their secret experiments.”

“Alchemists, you say!” exclaimed Arthur. “Can we not go speak with them?”

“Unfortunately, this particular tribe seems to have disappeared some time ago, leaving little trace of their habitation here except for these rock markings and an unseasonal formation of ice and snow on pillars at the far end of the dwelling – likely a part of their heathen magic.”

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At last, the knights of the round table returned to their base camp near the river, next to the herd of rock-bashing gazelles. One of the gazelles they saw that morning had not returned, but the knights were not terribly concerned about that. It would soon be nightfall, and several of the men started a fire on the embankment. This was not exactly the safari they had expected, though they did see many bewildering sights of the African wild. Their guide, it seemed, was more well-known for his narrating voice than his ability to elucidate the mysteries of Africa.