

The Storm King

Chapter 16: Guests

Artorias left the tailor with a bag full of coppers and began walking through the market. Just browsing through the stalls, he picked up a few things he needed, like some spell paper, ink, and a new hunting knife.

There were a few more things he was on the lookout for, but the paper and ink lightened his copper bag considerably given their relative scarcity this far north, so he eventually decided to just make for the food markets.

He hadn't seen Leon since he left the tailor, but Artorias wasn't too worried. When he was only ten years old, Leon had been harassed by a tribesman who noticed his coin pouch, and Leon left him with a broken nose, a shattered cheekbone, and a blind eye. This only contributed to his reputation, which was already quite widespread given where he lived and who his father was.

Artorias spent the majority of his remaining profits on filling the sleigh with provisions, like dried fish from a local river, fruits, and a few sacks of flour for bread. There were a few Greenhand tribesmen in the markets, so Artorias also grabbed some of their potatoes as well.

When he was done, the sleigh was as laden with food as it had been with fur, and Artorias started making his way back to the Torfinn's longhouse.

On the way, he managed to spot Leon. The sixteen-year-old boy had stopped at a booth in the food district and was now happily chowing down on a delicious smelling stew. When they had arrived, Leon had barely made any facial expressions, being rather uncomfortable around other people, but now, there was a smile as large as the Divine Scar on his face as he ate his meal.

Artorias noticed a few young ladies giving Leon some interested looks, but alas, the little lion was far too into his meal to notice. Not that he would otherwise, given his relative lack of knowledge about people, especially those of the female persuasion.

The older man decided not to interrupt his son and proceeded towards the longhouse. Leon would come find him when he was ready, and he felt that it was good for the young man to be out and about without his father.

Torfinn was waiting for Artorias to finish in the market and rose from his seat at the long table to greet his friend.

"Ah, Wraith-Killer! Welcome back!" He looked around but didn't see Leon. "Where's the Little Lion?"

"He's in the market eating as much as he possibly can," Artorias said with a smile.

Torfinn laughed, knowing full well the appetites of the two. He gestured to a servant, and the servant came forward to take the sleigh from Artorias' hands.

"I can have your food put into my pantry, those ice runes you carved are still working great, so it should all be quite well preserved for when you head back home. In the meantime, you told me Leon had found some food, but how about you?"

Artorias let the servant take the sleigh and joined Torfinn for a drink. The chief brought out some good mead and fresh chicken for Artorias, and they didn't speak much while they ate.

As Artorias ate, he noticed that Torfinn seemed a bit agitated. He was a normally happy and boisterous man, but now he couldn't sit still, and his face was abnormally serious. He was tapping his foot, and he kept shifting his weight around in his seat. Artorias thought to himself, *'It seems he has something he wants to talk to me about.'*

He quickly finished his food, and asked: "So what's up?"

Torfinn just laughed and said "Oh, you know, same old same old. The Vale has been peaceful, and the harvests are up. Everything is looking alright."

Artorias just stared at his friend. He didn't respond, and what followed was an awkward silence. Torfinn didn't last long before he broke.

"Oh alright! Things are fine now, but there are some dark things on the horizon. Rumors in the west say that old Hakon Fire-Beard has been making moves in the west, and we've had a sudden surge of immigrants from the western paths."

Torfinn's jolly face had been flush from the mead and his general jovial demeanor, but he grew serious as he continued to speak. "We aren't afraid of Hakon, not this far east, but I've had to send quite a few warriors out to the west to keep the peace among all the new arrivals.

"There are also some southerners who found a new footpath through the Frozen Mountains, and they've been trading some smuggled weapons with us for silkgrass. Recently, though, they've greatly expanded and fortified their camp on this side of the mountain range. I'd estimate a hundred or more smugglers in the camp, and their numbers keep growing. If things keep up, they might decide that they want to keep their steel, and just take the grass."

Artorias wasn't too surprised by this. New chiefs were frequently rising in the Vales, and this Hakon wasn't the first. These smugglers also weren't unique, as clothes made from silkgrass were luxury items in the south. Silkgrass only grew in the Vales, and trade with the tribes was hard and infrequent, so smugglers wanting to make a quick silver would often brave unexplored mountain paths.

Artorias sighed. "This doesn't look like too big of an issue. Smugglers are invariably commoners. They don't fight very well, and they're rarely more than a first-tier mage if that."

Torfinn was an early fifth-tier mage, considered a magical prodigy for the tribesmen, and easily the strongest man out of the all the Brown Bears. It would be the easiest thing for him to take care of a hundred first-tier smugglers.

"I had one of my thanes, Harald Golden-Hair, keep an eye on them. He's a fourth-tier mage, and he noticed some finely dressed people in the camp whose power he couldn't see through. I'm the only fifth-tier mage in the Vale, and if they have even one more than us, then they could walk right over us."

Artorias frowned. Usually, a higher-tiered mage could see a lower-tier mage's relative power by observing their aura. The same could not be said for the opposite. These 'finely dressed people' could be masking their aura, but that was something which was an enormous pain to do, so in all likelihood, they were stronger than the fourth-tier Harald Golden-Hair.

Torfinn didn't continue talking and just sat there looking dejected. Artorias sighed, before asking, "And what do you want me to do?"

Torfinn brightened up, but said, "I couldn't ask anything of you, my friend. I know you're only going to be here for several days."

"Just get out with it, don't play at being modest and humble."

"Very well then. I would like you to come with me and my warriors to destroy that smuggler's camp."

Artorias first instinct was to immediately refuse and was right about to do so when something occurred to him. He smiled at Torfinn, and said, "Sure, I'd love to go with, but under one condition."

Torfinn only hesitated for a brief moment before answering yes.

Artorias' smile took a slightly sinister turn. "I want my son to come with."

That really threw Torfinn for a loop. He did a double take, then asked just to confirm, “You want to bring the Little Lion with us to kill everyone in that camp? Are you sure? He’s not a blooded warrior yet, perhaps this might be a bit much for him.”

“He’ll go, or I won’t. I’ve taught him how to kill, but I want him to show me that he can. All he’s killed so far are rather weak forest creatures, but last month he single-handedly brought down a full-grown Snow Lion. He’s ready, and he needs to be there with us.”

Torfinn couldn’t really fault Artorias for this, as it was a cruel and vicious world. Parents might try and shield their children from this fact, but once they were gone those children would be torn apart by vultures. The best thing Artorias can do when teaching Leon how to survive is to give him a ruthless and unerring killing intent so that he would never falter in the face of his enemies and could sweep aside all in his way.

“...Very well. I’m gathering some of my people, but it will take a few weeks to get them all here. Feel free to stay here as long as you like until then.”

And with that, Torfinn and Artorias went back to drinking and small talk. Leon eventually came back, and Artorias let him know that they’d be staying in Vale Town for about a month, and the younger man had some mixed opinions about that. On the one hand, he wanted to go back home where it was quiet and there weren’t so many people, but on the other hand, he quite enjoyed browsing in the market.

And so, the two got settled in the longhouse.

About two and a half weeks after they had set off from the capital, Roland and his team finally emerged on the north side of the Frozen Mountains. It had been a rough trek over icy cliffs and narrow, rocky paths. Much of their path had been obstructed by old primeval forests that had been there since the plane had taken form out of the chaos, though much of the organic material had long since rotted away. There were still a few petrified chunks of the larger trees, but for the most part, these ‘forests’ were made up of the ice that formed on the outside of the trees and still retained their shape, even long after the tree had disappeared.

The knights were exhausted, and their followers even more so. They made camp on the first bit of dry ground they could find. Not even Victoria, the young noble lady from the warm and verdant west, complained about sleeping in the dirt because at least it wasn’t a freezing cave.

Despite their exhaustion, it only took them another two days to come into sight of Vale Town. The very same warrior who had seen Artorias and Leon was on watch again and again took off running towards the longhouse.

It wasn't hard for him to identify that these were knights, rather than tribal warriors. Their weapons were too fancy, their leather armor was ornate and made with techniques unknown to the tribesmen, and they carried themselves with far more pride and dignity than any tribesman ever would.

Torfinn heard of their arrival before they'd even set foot in the city and had a decidedly different reaction to it than when Artorias had come. The warrior informed his chief, then left, and Torfinn barely even glanced up from the turkey he was eating his way through.

When Roland and his team entered the city, they noticed that a large number of warriors had gathered and watched their every move. Roland was a sixth-tier mage, and his three knights were all of the fifth-tier, but despite their power, they felt extremely nervous. The way the warriors would watch them made them feel terribly tense and unwelcome.

Roland spread his magic senses out over the city and noticed that there were even more warriors waiting in the adjacent blocks to the main road. They seemed to be just waiting for them to make a hostile move. Even more, he saw in what he assumed was the market quarter, a large number of blacksmiths working hard at making and refining weapons, and most of the tailors in the city were stitching together crude leather armor.

He whispered to his knights, "They seem to be arming themselves for something, and I think that might be why they're a little jumpy right now. No one make any moves against them, and let's just make for the longhouse at the top of the hill." He nodded towards the hill and Torfinn's house at the top, and the group slowly walked towards it.

The warriors watching them followed along as they walked, and the normal tribesmen throughout the city cleared out of the road as they approached.

Roland frowned, as he finally got a good count of the warriors watching them, and it seemed to be over one hundred with another hundred waiting nearby.

It was a very tense walk to the center of the city, but the knights finally arrived before the door of Torfinn's longhouse and made to open it. It was an imposing thing, almost ten feet tall, and quite thick, but Roland had zero trouble pushing it open as he led his people inside.