

The Storm King

Chapter 17: A Meeting

A roaring fire in the center of the great hall greeted the knights upon entering the longhouse. Two rows of columns ran the length of the hall, separating it into thirds. There were a number of long wooden tables arranged around the bonfire, enough to seat about seventy or eighty people.

There were only around thirty people in the hall at that time, however, but none who could be said to resemble a chief. There was no high seat, no one dressed particularly different than the others, and certainly none wearing a crown.

Roland was at a loss, as he wasn't able to identify the chief. Luke stepped forward, intending to announce the party to the entire hall, but Roland stopped him with a quick gesture. He had an idea that these tribesmen wouldn't take him seriously if he was to be announced by a boy a decade his junior. So, Roland took a few more steps into the hall, and asked, "Good day to you all. I am Roland Magnus, a paladin in the service of the Bull King. I would like to arrange a meeting with the chief of our northern allies, the Brown Bear Tribe."

It was a simple greeting, introducing himself while also stating his purpose and reminding the tribe that they are allies. Many a tribesman gave a brief chuckle at that, and one leaning on one of the columns even spoke out. "*Allies?* You southerners haven't come this far north in almost twenty-five years, how are we still allies?"

Roland narrowed his eyes. He had always heard that the kingdom had tribal allies, and Prince August had even confirmed this with him. Copies of the signed agreement were held in the capital, Clear Ice Fortress, and the Grand Library in Teira. However, Roland had never seen any of these copies, and he had no idea what the terms of the alliance were, but if there had been no official contact with the Brown Bears in a quarter century, then how could they be considered allies?

Regardless, Roland had his mission and he needed the support of the locals. "Our kingdom still sees you as friends and considers our alliance ongoing. If there are any concerns about it, then I will speak with the tribe's chief about how to rectify them."

The warriors in the hall stared at the knights, creating an oppressive atmosphere. It doesn't matter how powerful one becomes, they still want to feel like they belong in a community, and if they go somewhere that was so blatantly unwelcoming, it could even make gods and immortals nervous.

The warrior who spoke out before kept his quiet, but a tall woman with long fair hair and a scar over her right eye took it as her turn to speak. "Of course we have concerns! If

we're allies, then where were all of you when the Red Crow Tribe invaded? We called for your help then, and you were nowhere to be found!

"Where were you when our villages were sacked and our people murdered, or worse? The Red Crows butchered and defiled them in their own homes! We called upon you, our supposed *ally*, and not a single knight marched north, not a single mage arrived to fulfill the terms of our alliance.

"You say that your king still wants to be allies, but it sounds to me like he just wants us to get on our knees and- "

"That's enough, Freyja." A large, muscular, heavily bearded man interrupted the woman's tirade and stood up from his seat near the fire. He waved the knights over, saying, "These are our guests, we ought to show them the proper courtesies. Come over here, knight, and sit by the fire. I'm the chief of the Brown Bears, Torfinn Ice-Eyes is my name."

Roland had been quite taken aback by Freyja's verbal assault, but Torfinn's interruption allowed him to recover. His stunned expression was quickly replaced with a jovial smile, and he gratefully nodded towards Torfinn, then began moving towards the fire. The other members of his party followed suit, but Torfinn stopped them when he continued to speak.

"You all must be very tired from your journey this far north. Asbjorn!" Torfinn looked at a nearby warrior, "Your barn is empty now, right?" The warrior nodded, and Torfinn turned back to Roland's party. "Good. Sir Roland, your people can stay there. I'm sure that they could use the rest. If you have the spare coppers, feel free to browse the markets, but I must warn you not make a scene.

"As for you, Sir Roland, you must have much to talk about. Come, sit and let's talk." Torfinn gestured to an empty seat next to his, and the warrior named Asbjorn walked forward, ready to lead the others to where they would be sleeping.

Most of Roland's party had looks of shock and disbelief on their faces, none more so than Sir Andrew.

"You want us to sleep in a *barn*? We're knights of the Bull Kingdom! We are in service to a paladin, one of the six greatest knights in all the kingdom, and you want to put us up like swine?!"

Torfinn narrowed his eyes and smiled viciously. "I *want* to tell you all to fuck off. I *want* you to sleep in the dirt and mud. I *want* you to go back south, and never look back..." Torfinn's smile faded, and he sighed. "...But we don't always get what we want. You wouldn't come all this way for no reason, and you won't leave just because I tell you to, so why don't we talk about it, hmm?" He looked to Roland and waited for a response.

Roland was born a commoner, the son of a palace guard. He didn't possess a noble's pride and was more than willing to compromise. He was, after all, one of the paladins, and as such represented the Bull Kingdom. "Chief Torfinn, we've come a long way, we're very tired and the road has tested our patience. I apologize if we seem irritable or have caused you offense." Roland gave Sir Andrew an icy glare, and the knight shut his mouth.

Fortunately, Dame Sheira and Sir Roger hadn't said anything and wisely decided to keep their silence. Their squires and men-at-arms were in no position to speak, either, so Roland turned back to Torfinn.

"We have, however, traveled a long way, and need a good rest. To that end, could I ask if there are any better places to stay than a barn, like an inn? Even a cheap one would be fine."

This question elicited more chuckles from the watching warriors, and even from Torfinn himself. "Where do you think you are, knight? There are no inns around that could take in such a large party.

"Besides, I want to keep you separated from my people as much as possible. Chief Freyja had a point, you were our allies but abandoned us when our hated rivals, the Red Crows crossed into our Vale to subjugate the tribes living here. That's left a lot of bad sentiments towards the south in the Vale.

"Other than that, I would offer the knights at least, if not the followers, use of my guest rooms, but sadly, they're all taken at the moment."

Roland desperately tried to keep up his smile and took a moment to keep his cool. He took a deep breath, and said, "Thank you for your hospitality." His party behind him didn't bother keeping a smile, especially those who had no smiles to begin with. They all looked like they had just been asked to actually sleep with animals, rather than in an empty barn.

Asbjorn walked to the longhouse door and began leading the party outside. Roland was about to follow when Torfinn stopped him.

"I would like to speak with you for a moment, knight. I'll have someone lead you to your comrades when we're done."

Roland didn't particularly want to stay, after all, the tribesmen had made it perfectly clear they didn't want the knights here, so he wanted everyone to cool down a bit.

"If it would be alright with you, Chief Torfinn, I would like to accompany my people to where we will be staying. As I said, we are all tired and need rest. I would still like to talk with you, but perhaps it could be tomorrow when we all might have a bit more patience."

"You might want to leave, but I want you to stay and tell me why you're here. Now, then, let's have a seat. I'll have some food brought to you, and we can chat." Torfinn's tone left no room for argument. Roland knew that trying to do so would be futile, as he had heard the same tone coming from Prince August on several occasions. So he sighed and followed Torfinn back his table.

On the way, he took the opportunity to observe the other warriors in the longhouse. Most were of the third-tier, probably some of the best warriors that the tribesmen could produce. There were five that had reached the fourth-tier, including the warrior that had spoken first and that Freyja woman, but Torfinn was the only fifth-tier mage among them.

But Roland had a nasty surprise awaiting him. He noticed in the corner, a man who looked to be in his mid-twenties, well-built and tall, with black hair and brown eyes. This man was the only man among the warriors who was clean shaven, and he had an easy-going smile.

He was dressed in thin furs and silkgrass, with a sword at his belt. This was odd, as the tribesmen didn't usually use swords, good steel to make them with was too rare in the Vales, so they typically stuck to axes and spears. But the thing that really set Roland off about this man was that Roland couldn't see through his power. If that was the case, then he was either suppressing his aura, he was of a higher tier than Roland, or he was a simple mortal.

The knight couldn't believe any of the possibilities, as suppressing an aura required access to techniques unknown to the tribesmen, the fifth-tier was largely considered their upper limit, and there was no way he would be present in the longhouse if he were a common mortal.

This was a man to watch out for.

Roland saw all of this in the time it took to take a few steps towards Torfinn's table. He sat down, and a few young servants brought out a plate of chicken and bread. Roland was given a horn of mead, and Torfinn told him to dig in.

Most of the warriors continued to watch Roland, so his unease never abated, but Torfinn had already returned to his own meal, so Roland decided to at least sample the food. The chicken was good and filling but lacking much of the spices and flavoring he was used to down south. Once he started eating, though, Roland found that he was too hungry to stop.

The entire longhouse was silent but for the two men eating, just the clinking of copper utensils and the sound of chewing. These were two physically active, full-grown men, so the food disappeared very quickly, but when he pushed his empty plate away, Roland didn't feel any more at ease. In fact, he felt even more awkward after the oppressive silence.

"Now then, knight, I have invited you to eat at my table, share my mead, and arranged a place for you to stay. I have met all obligations required of me in the name of hospitality. What brings you so far?"

Roland glanced around. All the warriors had been staring at him, except for that mysterious man in the corner who was staring into space like he didn't have a care in the world, but their attention had wavered in the ten minutes the two were eating. Now that Torfinn spoke, however, every eye was back on Roland with rapt interest.

"I have been sent from the capital seeking a specific item. It is exceptionally rare south of the Frozen Mountains, and it is somewhat urgent that I acquire it."

"And this item is...?"

"A substance called Heartwood Amber."

Torfinn looked a little confused, but the man in the corner subtly started paying attention, glancing over at Roland, though he went back to staring out of a nearby window quite quickly.

"I'm afraid I've never even heard of amber coming from heartwood trees before. How much of it do you need?"

"A chunk about the size of my fist, but the more I can get my hands on, the better."

"Well, there aren't that many heartwood trees in this particular Vale..." Torfinn appeared to lean back in his chair and think, but he was really taking a quick glance over at Artorias in the corner. Artorias simply smiled and nodded. They were good enough friends that they didn't even need to speak verbally to understand each other.

"...But I know where you can find them. I can even arrange a guide for you."

Torfinn gave Roland a crafty smile, and Roland knew it wasn't going to be so easy.

"And what would I need to do?"

"Let's be honest, here. Our alliance is dead. It's been dead for well over a decade, even if you claim otherwise. But I'm interested in renewing it. Of course, it won't happen right this second, you're no diplomat, after all. But I want your word that you will arrange for diplomats to be sent back here after you return south."

Roland's uncomfortable look lessened slightly at that request. *'Is that all? I was going to do that anyway. The prince needs to know that the kingdom's lost an ally, even if it's only the Valemén.'*

"You have my word, I will have the proper people come north again to renew our alliance."

Torfinn's smile grew wider. "Good! Good. I was hoping that you would be receptive to my offer. With that in mind, I trust that you won't turn down providing a symbol of your sincerity?"

Roland's heart almost stopped. "What kind of symbol?"

Roland locked eyes with Torfinn, and in that instant, knew that this man had planned everything. The hostility, the uncomfortable atmosphere, sending away his party, all for this moment. He wanted Roland to be uncomfortable because he knew Roland wasn't a diplomat. He wanted Roland to be more willing to agree in order to get out of this longhouse.

"You must have noticed that my people and I are getting ready to deal with pests. Specifically, smugglers. Smugglers from *your* kingdom. They have built a fortified compound in this Vale and have been getting less and less controllable. I don't trust these people in the Vale, and I will kill them before they start raiding our villages near to them."

Torfinn leaned in closer to Roland.

"And I want you to join me."