

The Storm King

Chapter 18: Friction I

“And I want you to join me.”

Roland could still hear those words as he made his way to the barn where his party would be staying. He had to admit a certain amount of grudging respect for Torfinn Ice-Eyes, the chief had played his hand perfectly.

Roland sighed. If this was what it took to get Heartwood Amber, then he and his party would help deal with these smugglers.

The barn he was led to wasn't that far from the longhouse, just down the hill it was built on and a few streets over. It was rather small, like all the other buildings, but big enough for Roland's party to sleep in. It was also quite solidly built, to Roland's surprise, with thick wooden walls and a heavy main door.

The inside of the barn wasn't what he expected, either, with one large room about fifteen feet high, and a few smaller rooms off to the side. *'Looks more like a storehouse than a barn.'*, Roland thought. He figured it was probably just a storehouse, given how far inside the city it was, but he was sure Torfinn had deliberately called it a barn just to rile them up.

He found Dame Sheira just inside, watching over her men-at-arms take inventory of their remaining supplies. Sir Roger was further in, checking through the smaller rooms, and planning out the sleeping arrangements.

Dame Sheira greeted him as he came in. “Sir Roland! Good to see the barbarians didn't keep you too long.”

“Careful now, don't go underestimating them. Their chief, at least, knows what he's doing, and some of the people with him...” Roland thought of the man in the corner, and his mysterious atmosphere. He didn't look like the tribesmen, with their thick beards and aggressive attitudes. In fact, when the longhouse was filled with the killing intent of the warriors, that man had looked barely even interested.

Roland had been invited back to the longhouse for a small feast at sundown and wanted to talk to that man if he could.

“I doubt that there's anything we need to worry about here. These people fumble about with magic, not knowing the first thing about how to properly train. Their strongest warrior is only a *fifth-tier* mage, for the ancestor's sake!” Dame Sheira chuckled, completely disregarding Roland's warning.

Roland gave her a disapproving look, but she didn't seem to notice.

"By the way, where are the others?" Roland asked.

"Oh! We didn't know how long you were going to be held up in the longhouse, so we sent the squires into the market with a few silvers to buy something more edible than our travel rations. Sir Andrew and his men-at-arms went with, saying they wanted to check out what the market had. As for us, we're just getting settled in here. We don't know how long this search will be, so we might as well get as comfortable as we can."

By this time, Sir Roger had finished inspecting the storehouse, and come over to join them.

"How's the place look?" asked Roland.

"It'll do. Any idea how long we'll stay?" replied Sir Roger.

Roland frowned. "We can go over that when the others return."

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"Tori, slow down! We have to get food first, shopping can come later!"

Luke ran after Victoria, Dame Sheira's noble squire. The young seventeen-year-old girl had been disdainful of the tribal market at first, but then she caught sight of all the raw silkgrass on sale. And like that, she was gone, with all the silver they had been given.

Silkgrass was a luxury material in the south, commanding such high prices as to be all but unaffordable to anyone but rich merchants and high lords.

But here, where silkgrass grew in abundance, large bundles of the stuff could be seen almost everywhere.

Victoria's eyes had nearly jumped out of their sockets when she saw the first tailor, a small stall near a side road in the market district. She had been disappointed that the entire offering was rather crudely made work clothes, feeling that it was a waste of such a fine material. She then immediately took off in search of a larger shop where she could find finer clothes.

Luke had run after her, wanting to simply get the food they were sent to buy and return to the storehouse. It wasn't quite as blatant as in the longhouse, but he could feel the hostile stares and even some concealed killing intent from the people around them and knew that it would be a bad idea to stay out on the streets.

But, Victoria wasn't listening. She was after a tailor, and she wasn't going to stop until she found one.

Victoria sped along the road, looking at each stall for only a moment before moving on. It took several minutes, but Luke finally caught up with her and stopped her by grabbing onto her shoulder.

“Ah! What are you doing?”

“Don’t just run off like that, we’ve already lost Sir Andrew! Besides, we can do this later, right? We need to find some food for the others first.”

“This won’t take too long, I’m only looking for a good tailor. There has to be one around here somewhere...” Victoria barely even looked at Luke as her head was practically on a swivel, constantly looking this way and that way, on the hunt for silkgrass.

She was about to take off again when a very large tribesman suddenly stepped in the way. Luckily, Luke was still holding her shoulder, so she didn’t crash into him, but he just stared at them, and started walking closer, while a smile broke out on his face.

“Well, well, well, looks like two lost little lambs separated from the flock.”

Luke and Victoria were stepping back a bit, as he just kept coming closer, intruding into their personal space.

“Pardon me, my good man, we were just leaving.” Luke tried to steer Victoria away from this man, but he reached out and grabbed her arm. Victoria tried to shake him off, not too difficult, she thought, as she was a second-tier mage, but he didn’t lose his grip.

“Where do you think you two are goin’? I wanna talk a bit.” The other tribesmen in the street had rapidly cleared out after seeing this man. As they got away as quick as they could, a few more tribesmen crept forward, blocking off the two squires as they tried to leave.

“What do you think you’re doing, you oaf? Let go of me and get out of our way!” Victoria began shouting at the thug, but his smile only grew wider. The other four approaching tribesmen had closed the distance, and now the squires were firmly caught between them. Only then did the first thug finally release Victoria.

She and Luke quickly stood back-to-back with each other. They didn’t have their weapons with them, as they had planned to be in the market with Sir Andrew and his men-at-arms, but that plan was derailed when Victoria had taken off in search of silkgrass. That being said, they were trained in hand-to-hand fighting and were second-tier mages, so they were confident that they could fight their way out if needed.

“You lot are from the south, right? That means you must have a whole bunch of silvers on ya’. How ‘bout you hand ‘em over and we won’t take the girl for a ride?” The thug blatantly started staring at Victoria’s tight and attractive body with a disgusting look on his face.

"Damn pig." Victoria and Luke began channeling their magic into their muscles, preparing for a fight. The five tribesmen simply smiled and did likewise, while closing in. Then, unexpectedly, the first one froze, and then the others quickly followed suit.

The squires had been concentrating almost exclusively on the thugs when they had surrounded them and hadn't noticed the young man who had approached. The thugs had, however, and were now looking at him with fear and dread in their eyes.

It was a tall black-haired youth with shining gold eyes. He was staring at the lead thug like a bird of prey would at a field mouse. The thugs backed away from the squires, in order to present a united front against this young man. The squires took this opportunity to scramble out from between them, moved off to one side.

The youth merely said two words to the thugs: "Piss off," and they took off running as fast as their legs could take them.

The squires stared as the thugs who had been so confident just a second ago vanished into the distance. It took them a moment for their shock to wear off, and by then the youth had already walked past them.

Victoria immediately ran after him. Luke sighed and ran after her.

"Good sir! If it's not too much trouble, would you allow me to offer you my thanks? You did my friend and I a great kindness..."

The youth had stopped and looked over his shoulder. As soon as his eyes met Victoria's, she knew instantly why those thugs had run away, even though he too was only a second-tier mage. She felt his unbridled killing intent, an overwhelming pressure hammered into her, and for a moment, she stopped breathing and felt her heart speed up in terror. But she soon began channeling her own magic, causing her aura to erupt and resist the killing intent.

Luke had been frozen by the sudden killing intent behind her but reacted just as quickly. His aura joined hers in combatting this youth's, and finally, the pressure abated.

The youth turned his head back around and kept walking. The squires didn't follow this time.

Victoria turned to Luke. "What the hell was that? It felt like I was staring at some primordial beast!" She shivered and moved a little closer to Luke.

"I know. Who the hell was that guy?" Luke moved a little closer to Victoria. It wasn't until their arms brushed against each other's that they jerked away and came to their senses.

"We, uh, we need to get that food. We should get on that," Luke said, a little nervously.

"Yeah, we ought to get on that," Victoria said with embarrassment.

"Hey! There you are!" A voice rang out from the empty street behind them. The squires turned around and were surprised to see Adrianos Isynos, one of Sir Andrew's men-at-arms.

"Adrianos! What are you doing here?" asked Luke.

"Sir Andrew sent me after you two when you took off in the crowd. I'm glad I found you, too, this seems like a shady place." Adrianos took a look around at the empty street.

"Yeah, we just ran into a few shady people..." said Victoria, looking in the direction the youth had disappeared into.

"Oh? Are they still around?" asked Adrianos, his hand moving to the hilt of the sword at his belt.

"No, they were chased away," Luke replied.

Adrianos slowly took his hand off the sword, then smiled. "Good. I'd hate to have to kill a few tribesmen for harassing you. Anyway, let's get back to Sir Andrew. We are here for a purpose, after all."

"Right!" Luke and Victoria answered in unison. The three then made their way back to Sir Andrew, and no one else got in their way. The squires didn't forget that youth, however. The amount of killing intent focused within his gaze exceeded even battle-hardened fourth-tier mages!

But they put him out of their mind once they got back to work. As much of an impression as he had made on them, they still had a job to do.