

The Storm King

Chapter 19: Friction II

It was only a few minutes later that the squires rejoined Sir Andrew, and after a few harsh words about running off in a strange place, they went back to looking for good food.

The food vendors in the market were surprisingly varied, with plenty of meat and fruit available, along with freshly cooked bread that gave off a heavenly scent. Every time the group passed a baker, they had to fight the urge to buy the whole stall.

Of course, they couldn't really tell if that was simply because they had been eating travel rations for a week and were quite tired, but the smell was tantalizing nonetheless.

Luke, Victoria, and the other two squires, Kevin and John, examined every food stall but never bought anything. They were just browsing and intended to come back to the stalls that made the best impression.

Sir Andrew and the men-at-arms were walking with them, but they were watching the crowd rather than the stalls. They had been very wary of the locals already, given the dirty looks and vague killing aura the tribesmen would have when they saw the southerners. Now, after Victoria and Luke's near-fight with those thugs, the older men made sure to keep the squires between them and returned every dirty look they received.

Of course, all the warriors who could fight evenly with the third and fourth-tier men-at-arms and the fifth-tier Sir Andrew, were all in the longhouse or not in the city, so the auras of Sir Andrew's group were enough to dissuade any bold or reckless tribesmen.

"Lu! Look at that! What kind of fruit is that?" Victoria pointed to a basket full of dark blue round fruits. They looked somewhat like an apple, only about fifty percent larger.

"Not a clue..." Luke waved over to the stall vendor, who was watching them from the other side of the large stall. "Excuse me, but could I trouble you to tell me what this is?"

The vendor had been glaring at them from the moment they stopped in front of his stall, and when Luke asked his question, he rolled his eyes, not even bothering to conceal his contempt.

"It's food."

Luke had a polite smile on his face but looked slightly taken aback at the reply. "Yes... I'm sure it's perfectly edible, but could you tell us anything more about it? My friend is interested- "

"Are you going to buy it or not? Ten coppers if you are, if not, then fuck off."

"...No, I don't think we will. Good day, sir." Luke grabbed Victoria's hand and steered her away from the stall. She had been so stunned by the vendor's hostility that she couldn't even think of anything to say.

Sir Andrew had noticed the exchange and gave the vendor a look that could freeze water before following the squires.

"What the hell was *his* problem!? Isn't he trying to sell things!? Why would he treat customers that way!?" When Victoria finally recovered her tongue, she was incensed. Luke and John almost had to hold her back from running back to the vendor and smashing his teeth in.

"It's fine, Tori, we can just buy food elsewhere. I'm sure someone will be more willing to take our money, it's not worth it to get so worked up over one street vendor." Luke did manage to keep her from flying off the handle and attacking the tribesman, but Victoria's mood drastically worsened. It was already rather terrible from the thugs and that youth, but now she was quiet and positively seething.

The group visited a meat vendor and tried buying some pork. The stall vendor barely even looked at them before chasing them off.

They went to a baker to buy some bread, and the baker wanted a whole silver coin for a single biscuit. Naturally, the squires weren't having any of that and moved on again.

Things went on like this for several more hours, with every vendor they visited either being a complete ass or trying to severely overcharge them. Eventually, the group had to admit defeat and moved to leave the market quarter.

As they were leaving, Luke took one last look back and noticed the first vendor they visited. A tribesman had just picked up one of those dark blue fruits and tossed the vendor a single copper coin in return. The vendor only smiled and nodded, and the tribesman walked off.

Luke shook his head and sighed. It seemed they were truly hated up here.

It was a short walk back to the storehouse, but it was still incredibly tense. Every tribesman they ran into on the way would avoid them like a plague, though at least they weren't being followed by tribal warriors like they were when they arrived.

Roland sensed their return and came out to greet them.

Dame Sheira glared at the returning group. "What happened? I thought you all left to grab some food."

Luke sighed. "Doing business with these people is impossible."

Victoria backed him up. "They were either extremely rude or tried to overcharge us by a wide margin. One baker wanted almost ten silvers for a single loaf of bread!" While she said this, she returned the money Dame Sheira had given them for food.

Dame Sheira couldn't hide her disappointment, and neither could anyone else. Roland, at least, had a good lunch, but everyone else was starving. But, they had to suck it up and eat what they had. Travel rations *again*.

Once everyone had choked down their 'food' and gotten settled in, Roland called the three other knights and their squires together.

"We've been invited to a small feast tonight. Get some rest, because all eight of us are going."

None of them were particularly thrilled, especially Luke and Victoria. The tribesmen had made it perfectly clear that Roland and his party were not welcome, and they were starting to think that maybe they should just leave. But, Roland wasn't done talking yet, and what he said next left them outright angry.

"They're also sending a war party out in a few days, and we will be joining them."

"*What?!*" The knights cried out in unison.

Luke wasn't too happy about it, either, and made his opinion known. "Sir, I don't mean to be rude, but why are we doing this? The Brown Bears are all but hostile to us, why are we going to help them? If they want someone dead, let them do it themselves."

"I agree, Sir, let them deal with their own problems. We have our mission, so let's just go look elsewhere for this Heartwood Amber. I'm sure there are people in markets who would tell us the location of some groves, though we'll probably have to pay quite a few silvers for the information..." Sir Andrew said.

Roland looked at his upset team, and they quieted down. "This isn't just their problem. The bandits the tribesmen want dead are getting ready to raid the Brown Bear villages, and they come from somewhere in the Kingdom. This is our problem as well, given that it involves our countrymen. Besides, I've already agreed, and I won't go back on my word. Once we return, Torfinn has even promised a guide to take us to a large Heartwood Tree grove."

Sir Roger met Roland's gaze. "Sir, I've fought alongside you for almost a decade now. I trust you as much as I can trust anyone. If you say this is the way we do it, then this is the way we do it."

Luke grit his teeth and nodded in agreement. Dame Sheira was about to say something but decided against it. She, too, trusted Roland and put her faith in his judgment. The others fell in line as well. They had voiced their concerns, made their displeasure known, but ultimately, Roland was still their commander.

"Good. Now leave your obvious weapons with your men-at-arms or put them in your soul realms, and let's go see what qualifies as a feast for the Brown Bear Tribe." Of course, the knights couldn't take their big weapons, but they would never fully disarm themselves. They still had a few knives and daggers on them, not to mention their magic.

The longhouse was far more packed than it was when they had arrived. Instead of only about thirty warriors filling the hall, now there were over a hundred.

'Hmmm. Torfinn must have invited some prominent tribesmen in the city, they can't be warriors.' Roland thought to himself. He had already seen through the power of all the new people in the longhouse, and barely any were even of the first-tier, and less than five had broken through into the second.

The tribesmen at the entrance noticed their arrival, and immediately quieted down and made way, staring at the knights. Torfinn was drinking and laughing with Artorias and Freyja but looked up once he saw the motion at the door.

"Ah! The southern knights are here!" Now that Torfinn drew attention to them, every conversation in the hall died down, and all the tribesmen's eyes were now firmly locked on the knights.

"Yes, we were quite happy at the invitation, Chief Torfinn, and couldn't refuse." Torfinn's big smile could be seen even through his majestic beard, and Roland replied with an equally friendly and jovial smile.

"Good! Good. Come, sit over here, Sir Knight, let us talk some." Freyja moved from Torfinn's side over to sit next to Artorias, making room for Roland. Roland obliged Torfinn, walking across the hall to sit next to the chief. The knights all sat down next to Roland, across from Artorias and Freyja. The squires then sat at the other end of the table.

"So, how's the barn? You lot comfortable?" Torfinn asked.

"Yes, it's a nice place, perfectly suited to our needs. I must thank you for your generosity in arranging it for us." Roland replied.

"Think nothing of it! We Valemén take great pride in our hospitality, I couldn't let you go off and sleep in the street! What would my people say about me then?"

While the two spoke, the rest of the hall went back to talking amongst themselves, and the knights breathed a sigh of relief. This wasn't going to be like earlier, where all the tribesmen would be watching their every move with an intense gaze.

Roland also noticed that everyone was already eating, so he quickly nodded to his knights. They then nodded at their squires, waiting until their subordinates had taken some food before reaching for any themselves.

Roland's group ate with as much dignity as they could, but it began to crumble as they finally tasted food that wasn't their rations. Torfinn laughed as he saw them dig in, and he turned back to Roland.

"How do you like my city? Have you seen the market, or been to any of the shrines? Bought some of the silkgrass that you southerners go crazy for?"

"We did browse your market and were quite impressed. It was busy, and the wares were varied and of fine quality. You truly have a rich and prosperous city."

Torfinn's eyes narrowed. His smile thinned somewhat, and he looked intently into Roland's eyes. "You don't have to flatter here, knight. We're not so arrogant as to demand a favorable answer when asking a question."

Roland was a little taken aback. It was fairly customary to flatter your host, even if both sides knew it was a lie. It was simply to express some gratitude for the host's hospitality. But, it seemed that Torfinn didn't appreciate it.

Torfinn continued. "I was told that there were a few problems today. Problems involving your people. I just want to hear your side."

Roland's smile had disappeared, but he wasn't going to take any slander against his party, even if it was just an insinuation. "If there were any problems, then it was *your* people's fault. Two of my squires were almost assaulted in the streets today, and your market vendors inflated their prices so much that we couldn't bring ourselves to buy anything."

Roland and Torfinn stared at each other, Torfinn with his smile still firmly in place, with Roland stoic and serious.

Torfinn suddenly burst out laughing. "Ha ha ha ha! Good, I had almost thought you were just an empty-headed yes-man. I can't do anything about those merchants, they charge what they like, but the safety and security of guests in my city *is* my responsibility. I've already had the thugs who bothered your people brought in. They were known ruffians, and I had two fingers taken from each."

That stunned Roland and his party. Those had thugs already been arrested and punished? Roland sighed, this truly was a barbaric place. There are no trials, and punishments are carried out immediately so there were no prisons, either. Of course, that was assuming Torfinn was telling the truth.

It only took Roland a moment to recover. "...Thank you, for your... swift justice."

Torfinn saw that Roland didn't really approve but decided not to press him on it. He knew from Artorias that the people in the south do things differently when it comes to punishing criminals.

At this time, another person arrived in the longhouse. No one really noticed him, but those who did made way. Victoria and Luke almost froze when he appeared at the table, taking a seat right next to Freyja. This was the youth who scared off the thugs!

When he took his seat, Freyja immediately threw her arms around him. "Ah, Little Lion, I missed you!"

Leon didn't return the hug, his body just stiffened, and didn't relax until she withdrew her arms. "Look at you, you're getting to be not-so-Little anymore, aren't you?"

Freyja beamed at him, and scooted a little closer, pressing herself up against his arm. "Hey, why don't we go somewhere more private after the feast is over? You've never been with a woman, have you? Why don't I show you a few things?"

"Freyja, you shouldn't get so close to him, look how uncomfortable he is." Artorias playfully chided the tribeswoman. Indeed, Leon's face was red, and his mouth was twitching like it couldn't settle on an expression. He clearly had no idea how to respond to the older woman.

"Oh? And why are you such a killjoy? I'm just teasing him, but maybe it's you who needs to let off a little steam." Freyja then leaned over, throwing her other arm around Artorias and giving him a bewitching smile and leaning over to give the older man a better view. "I'm game for relieving your tension if you are, we don't have to sit here and listen to the chief talk with these ones, now do we?"

Artorias chuckled and pushed her off him. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to decline." Leon tried to regain his composure as he slid away from Freyja, but his face was still bright red and stiff as if carved from wood.

Victoria slowly looked at Luke sitting next to her. They both knew what each other was thinking. *'Is this really the guy who froze us with his killing intent earlier?'*

Sir Andrew, who was sitting next to Luke, noticed their odd behavior and gave them a curious look. Luke leaned in to whisper to him, and it was only then that Leon glanced

over. But a glance was all it was, no killing intent, no wild aura, Leon just looked away and didn't look back.

"Well then, knight, since you'll be coming with the war party, I'll have some supplies sent over to you. As it's looking now, we'll be setting off in three days. Meet us at the south city entrance on that morning, and we'll go deal with those smugglers. You'll have your guide after we return to the city." With that, Torfinn basically ended the conversation with Roland. The knight didn't have time to respond before Torfinn turned to talk with Artorias, so Roland simply sighed and focused on the food in front of him.

Sir Andrew, for his part, was occasionally looking at Leon, while Luke and Victoria simply tried to pretend he wasn't there, just as Leon was doing to them.

Once Roland and his party finished eating, there was nothing else for them to do, so they immediately left. The atmosphere was still rather awkward for them, and they didn't want to linger. They returned to the storehouse to rest and prepare for heading back out in three days.