

Storm King 21

Chapter 21: Recon

“Freyja!” Torfinn called out from the center of the village. The woman looked up, she had been supervising a few of the warriors as they cleared a house of rubble to set up camp.

“Torfinn? Need something?”

“Harald’s scout camp isn’t too far, maybe ten miles. It would only take ten minutes or so to cover that at a full sprint, right?” Freyja nodded in response. “Good. Get out there, grab Harald, bring him back here immediately.”

“Sure thing!” Freyja gave Torfinn a glowing smile, and then she took off. The lower ranked warriors watched in awe as the fourth-tier woman really began to exert herself for the first time since the march began. It showed them that the higher tiered warriors were greatly slowing themselves down for the sake of the rest of the war party.

Asbjorn then walked up to Torfinn with a grim look.

“We’ve got the final count of the dead. Forty-nine. All male, as far as we could tell. No children, either. This village held about one hundred and fifty, or so, as I recall, maybe a bit more, but everyone else is gone.”

Torfinn sighed. It was obvious who it was that did this. There was no one else around except for the smugglers, and with their increasingly infrequent contact, fortifications, and expansions in the vale, it was clear that they were planning on staying a while.

He glanced at the bodies. They had been arranged around a large metal pyre in the center of the village. Bodies were burned in the vales, and many villages had even gone to the extraordinary expense of building metal pyres that they would fill with wood when it needed to be used. As with Valetown, the houses in the village were made of wood, so most of the rubble that the warriors were cleaning up was being used to fill the pyre. The warriors were getting ready to send the dead villagers to the Sky Mother.

Torfinn turned back to Asbjorn. “There are a few other small villages in the area, but none that cultivate silkgrass. I doubt they were hit, as they wouldn’t have anything the bandits would particularly want, but just in case, send a few third-tier warriors to check on them.”

Asbjorn nodded and walked off.

Next, Torfinn went to a neighboring house, where the survivor had been brought. Artorias came outside just as Torfinn arrived, with Leon close behind.

“He’s dead.” Artorias wasn’t one to sugarcoat bad news.

Torfinn clenched his fists in rage. He was barely able to choke out a “How?”

“My healing spells closed his wounds, but there was still too much blood loss, not to mention other internal injuries I’m sure were present. It was a miracle he lived as long as he did.”

Torfinn was almost shaking with anger. Years ago, the rivals of the Brown Bear tribe, the Red Crows, had invaded their vale. They raided villages, burning them to the ground, killing the men, and enslaving everyone else. They stole everything not nailed down and then moved on to the next village. The Red Crows weren't defeated until all the tribes of the vale had united behind the Brown Bears, behind Torfinn Ice-Eyes,

But Torfinn's own father and brother had been killed in the fighting, many of his people had been slaughtered and their homes destroyed. And now, he had to see it again. He would never forgive the ones who had inflicted such pain on his people, not even after he used his ax to split their skulls in half.

Freyja really beat feet, because it took barely more than half an hour for her to return, with a short golden-haired man accompanying her. This man had a stocky frame and a smooth youthful face. If anyone were to guess, they'd say he looked barely twenty years old by mortal standards, but he was already in his thirty-fifth year.

Roland and his party had occupied a ruined house not far from Torfinn's, but he didn't notice Freyja's return. Ever since he saw Artorias' healing spells, Roland had been lost in contemplation. He increasingly felt that *something* was familiar about the man, but he just couldn't place it. Those spells were clearly first-aid spells from the Bull Kingdom, not the sort of things that tribesmen could easily get their hands on, and they would never use something so rare on a random farmer they didn't know. This 'Wraith-Killer' was probably from south of the Frozen Mountains, Roland was sure of it.

"Harald!" Torfinn called out as soon as he and Artorias saw his thane across the village square.

"Chief!"

Those shouts finally brought Roland back to reality, and he stepped outside to see what was going on.

Torfinn and Artorias met Harald and Freyja in the center of the village, with Harald and Torfinn clasping each other's wrist in a warrior's handshake. Torfinn, however, wasn't looking very happy. Not surprising, given that not even thirty feet away, a dozen bodies were burning in the pyre.

"Tell me, Harald, what happened here? Who did this?"

"I think you know who did it, Chief. Three days ago, those smugglers left their fort and came here to sack the village. This was the village they had been buying silkgrass from, for the most part, so they knew where to find what they were looking for. Fortunately, the rest of the villages around are Greenhand villages, growing potatoes and wheat, so they ought to be fine."

"Why didn't you stop them?" Torfinn demanded.

"With just me and my six scouts? They left their fort with over a hundred! We would have been massacred, and the raid would still have happened."

Torfinn's face grew red in anger, but he shut his mouth for a moment and suppressed it. "...I know. It's good you're still alive, at least. Did you get a good count of the enemy?"

"I got one hundred and nineteen, plus about fifty or sixty more that stayed behind their walls. They've gotten quite comfy here, I even saw a guy whose power I couldn't see through do something to the gate

of their fort. This definitely wasn't the last raid they had planned, they're busy fortifying their position even further."

Torfinn nodded, raising his hand to his chin, and stroked his beard as he thought.

"What about the rest of the villagers? Do you know where they are?"

"They were rounded up by the southerners and brought back to their fort after they grabbed all the silkgrass" Harald said.

"Hmmm... Why would they do that? They already had the silkgrass, why bother taking the villagers?" Torfinn thought out loud.

To that, Artorias stepped forward. "They probably want to bring them back south as slaves. I'm sure they intend to force the villagers to try and grow more silkgrass in the south. That would prove to be a very lucrative business, assuming they can even get the stuff to grow."

For some reason, silkgrass doesn't grow in the south. There have always been a few merchants or nobles who give it a try every generation, but no one had ever been successful.

Torfinn clenched his fists, grit his teeth, and had to fight off the urge to smash something in his anger. But then, a thought occurred to him, and he very quickly calmed down. He turned to Freyja and smiled.

"You're in charge for now. I'm going to the southerner's fort, I want to see this place for myself. Harald, you come with me. Freyja, let Asbjorn know what's going on when he comes back, I sent him to check on the other villages in the area." Out of the corner of his eye, Torfinn noticed Roland nearby, listening to the exchange, and called out to him. "You'd better come with too, knight."

Roland nodded, and turned to Sir Roger, letting him know that he'd be in command for now.

"I'll come too. I'm somewhat curious about this fort they've built." Artorias couldn't resist. His hand was on the hilt of his sword, and he was feeling restless. For the past few weeks, he'd been lounging in Valetown, not doing much of anything. Now that there was finally something to do, there was no way he'd be left behind.

Leon frowned. He wasn't too far away and could hear every word, and he was just as restless as Artorias. Their life involved near constant movement, whether training or hunting, so he wasn't doing too well from all the relaxing in Torfinn's longhouse. But, Artorias shook his head back at him. This was going to just be a scout mission, and Leon was too weak to accompany them.

The four men set off at a brisk pace. Harald was the lowest-tiered mage among them, at the fourth-tier, so the others adjusted themselves to match him. They caught sight of the bandit fort in slightly less than an hour, though.

The square fort had been built into the side of a sheer cliff at the very edge of the vale. There were three wooden walls and a pair of watchtowers at the outside corners. A large gate was set into one side, at the end of the only path up the mountain. From the outside, the fort didn't look all that big, so the scout group quickly climbed another nearby mountain, and managed to get high enough to see down into the fort itself.

Indeed, the inside of the fort wasn't big enough for two hundred bandits and over a hundred prisoners, but the four saw a cave on the mountainside of the fort. None could see too far into it, however.

"This doesn't look too bad. We can definitely take them tomorrow. Have the war party move up the mountain, bust down that flimsy-looking gate before they know what's what, and then put down all the bandits we see." Harald smiled in anticipation, but Roland shook his head and Artorias merely gave a bitter smile.

Artorias was the one who spoke up. "It won't be so easy. That gate has been warded, I doubt even bringing a good strong battering ram would open it. We'll have to open it from the inside."

Harald looked back at Artorias, while his smile vanished. "... Shit."

Torfinn looked thoughtful but quickly decided on a course of action.

"Look, their sentries aren't all that attentive. I doubt they even send out scouts, so we can probably get the war party to the base of the mountain and hide them in the tree line without them noticing. Then, we have a few people climb those watchtowers, kill the sentries, and open the gate. The war party will be able to enter without the alarm going off and kill the bandits in their sleep."

Artorias approved of that plan. "That should work, assuming no one makes too much noise. They haven't set up alarm wards at the top of the wall, so getting over won't be a problem. In fact, they seem to be rather lax in setting up defenses, the only other place above ground that has any is the mouth of the cave. It only seems to be warded to scatter magic senses, though, so entering the cave ought to be ok."

"My knights and I can take one of those towers. The rest of my party can accompany your warriors as they charge after we get the gates open." Roland finally spoke up.

Torfinn looked at Harald, the only one who hadn't said anything about his plan. The thane simply smiled and nodded, so Torfinn nodded back.

"Good. Let's head back to the village, make sure everyone knows the plan."

And with that, the group left, making their way back to the village, with Harald making a detour to grab his scouts and follow the next morning. Excitement over the coming battle ran through them, and they picked up the pace on their way back.

Asbjorn had returned before them. Luckily, Harald was right and none of the other villages nearby had been raided.

When Torfinn, Artorias, and Roland returned, Roland called his knights together while Asbjorn, Freyja, and the third-tier warriors gathered around them, waiting to hear the news. Leon didn't join the group but remained where he could hear what was said. Many of the other warriors also crowded around, listening to their chief.

Torfinn cleared his throat and began to explain the plan. "Alright, here's what's going to happen! Asbjorn and Harald will lead you all tomorrow. You will sneak up on the fort tomorrow night, while a select group goes over the walls. That will be me, Freyja, the knights, and Wraith-Killer," Torfinn nodded to each one in turn.

“After we take the bandit’s watchtowers, we’ll open the gate, everyone will charge into the fort, and **KILL EVERY ONE OF THOSE BASTARDS!**”

All of the surrounding warriors gave a great cry, raising their weapons into the air. “YYEEEAHHHH!!!!!”

Chapter 22: The Raid I

Few could sleep that night. Torfinn had gotten the warriors worked up, and it took several hours for them to calm down. But, they did eventually get some rest, and the war party set off early the next morning.

It took until afternoon for the warriors to approach the bandit’s mountain, their progress slowed only when they entered the forest in the south of the vale. Harald and his scouts met up with the warriors on the way, and the war party didn’t stop again until they were only about a mile down the mountain slope from the bandit fort.

Now, they simply had to rest and wait. The warriors caught up on the sleep they missed the night before and watched the sun sink towards the horizon.

After the sun went down, the war party began to stir and limber up for the battle to come. They waited until night had truly fallen before setting out. Hiding two hundred undisciplined warriors is a tall order, but Torfinn, his thanes, and the third-tier warriors managed to keep the noise to a minimum.

Fortunately, Torfinn had been right when he observed that the sentries the bandits posted weren’t attentive because the war party made it all the way to where they were to wait several hundred feet from the tree line without the bandits getting so much as a glimpse of them. Before them lay the rocky slope of the mountain, steadily getting steeper as it rose towards the peak. The fort wasn’t too far up, only a couple hundred feet or so, an easy climb for the stronger mages.

The leaders all met one last time at the center of the war party’s line to confirm details of the plan. It was decided that Artorias, Torfinn, Freyja, and Leon would attack the tower on the left, while Roland, his three knights, and their squires would attack the other. Asbjorn and Harald waited with the war party, preparing to take a few dozen men and charge the only path up the slope when the gate of the fort opened.

Right before the groups separated, Artorias looked to his son. “Are you ready, little lion? Feeling nervous at all?”

Leon didn’t say anything back, he only smiled and sent out some of his killing intent.

Artorias smiled. “Good.”

It wasn’t a hard climb up the slope. At first, they simply had to stay low and walk over the rocks. They didn’t have to be too careful, as the sentries in the tower were more concerned with staying awake than keeping watch. As the slope grew steeper, however, they had to begin crawling on all fours, but this allowed them to stay even closer to the ground.

Artorias was the first to reach the walls. There was a thin strip of flat land between the wall and the top of the slope, maybe five or six feet wide, which Artorias noted was too smooth to be natural. He

frowned, as the land the fort was built on had probably been flattened by an earth mage, as the expense of having magical engineers do the same would not be worth it this far outside of civilization. The earth mage who did it must be strong.

Roland reached the walls next, on the other side of the fort, closely followed by the rest of the group. He and his knights silently drew their weapons, a sword for Roland, a spear for Dame Sheira, Sir Andrew had his battle-ax, and Sir Roger had a pair of daggers. Normally, Sir Roger would use a mace, but he was trying to be quiet, so he went for smaller weapons, though he still carried his mace in a sling on his back. The squires each had one-handed swords, but they stayed in their sheathes for now. They were here largely to watch and learn from the knights.

Torfinn's group also drew their weapons. Artorias had his longsword, Leon had his bow, Freyja had a short sword and a shield, and Torfinn himself carried a hatchet and a dagger, with a longer ax strapped to his back.

Leon watched the three others in his group make their final quick preparations. His role was essentially the same as the squires, to watch and learn.

One of the sentries in the tower yawned and began walking around in the tower, while the other four no longer bothered to pretend to be alert and broke out a pack of cards. The restless sentry had felt a slight chill run down his spine and decided to glance down the slope. He was greeted with the sight of Torfinn's group staring back at him.

The sentry's eyes widened in alarm and his heart skipped a beat, but he still groped for the sword at his belt and he sucked in a breath to shout to the others. Leon reacted fast and loosed an arrow. The other four sentries in the tower only saw the other man stiffen, before falling forward over the wall. As they all stared in shock, Artorias, Torfinn, and Freyja had leaped up the twenty-foot-high wall with ease, and in less than a heartbeat, made each sentry shorter by a head.

This was all done in silence. Artorias glanced at the other tower and saw that Roland and the knights had already seized it and were helping the squires up the wall. Artorias walked back to the wall and extended a hand down to Leon. Leon, like the squires, was still only a second-tier mage, so while he could jump just high enough to climb into the tower, it wouldn't be so smooth and silent as the others. He quickly jumped, grabbing his father's hand, and was pulled into the tower.

Artorias smiled at Leon in approval. His son had gotten the first kill of the night! The knights and Valemen dropped down from the towers, but Artorias took the time to relieve one of the dead bandits of his sword and handed it to Leon. The younger man had never owned a proper sword before, and though the blade was made of poor-quality steel, it was still a far sight better than anything they would find in the vale market.

Leon's eyes widened, and a huge smile broke out on his face. Artorias patted his son on the shoulder, but then turned and rejoined Torfinn on the ground. Leon quickly collected himself and followed suit.

The two groups began making their way towards the gate. The interior of the fort had half a dozen buildings, each big enough to house thirty or forty people. The knights and tribesmen were tempted to spread their magic senses out over the fort, but the stronger mages among the bandits might be able to

notice it if they weren't careful, so they had decided to rely on their physical senses until the rest of the war party was through the gates.

Unlike the towers, which had five men apiece, the gate was guarded by only three men, and they were about as attentive as the tower sentries. They didn't notice the trespassers jumping down from the tower and regrouping behind the closest building to the gate.

Once the two groups linked up, Torfinn, Freyja, and Roland surged out from behind the building, crossed the open area in a flash, and killed the gate guards before they even knew what was happening.

The gate itself was the only part of the wall that the bandits had bothered to ward against attacks, so Artorias and Sir Andrew immediately went about removing them to open the gate. It wasn't too difficult, as the wards were fairly minor, but they still locked the gate too tightly to open without alerting the entire fort.

While those two were working, everyone else spread out around the open area surrounding the gate. They sidled up to the buildings, keeping an eye on the gaps and doors, and nearby entrance to the cave. Only Leon and Kevin, Sir Andrew's squire, stayed with the two opening the gate.

The glyphs making up the wards were each made of several connected runes, so to destroy the ward, each rune had to be scratched out or otherwise destroyed, something Artorias estimated to only need a minute or two.

While Artorias and Sir Andrew were busy taking a knife to the runes, one of the doors of the buildings opened, and a sleepy bandit half walked and half stumbled out, with a pipe in one hand and a pouch of leaves in the other. He stepped out into the fort's open area and was greeted by the sight of the infiltration team.

The bandit froze and looked around. He was completely surrounded, and all eyes were on him. Freyja made to sneak up on him and cut his throat, but she didn't move fast enough. The pipe dropped from his hand, and he was about to shout and raise the alarm, but seeing Freyja was too far away from him, Leon immediately silenced him with an arrow to the throat. The man made a few gurgling noises, then collapsed.

Unfortunately, someone inside the building heard him fall, and the door opened again.

"Hey Damien, are you alr- shit!" Another man had poked his head out of the door, and seeing the dead bandit, he swore and ducked back inside. Then, he began to shout.

"EVERBODY, GET UP! WE'RE UNDER ATTACK! EVERYBODY UP!"

There was some confusion at first, but in seconds there came more shouting from the buildings, along with the sounds of a large number of bandits rising and arming themselves.

Artorias and Sir Andrew were only about halfway through breaking the wards by this point. They simply looked at each other, then began channeling their magic. The others regrouped nearer to the gate and prepared themselves to hold the gate.

Artorias then sent much of his power into his arms and threw himself against the gate. The wood splintered, and the planks bent and cracked, but the gate just barely held. The remaining wards glowed

brightly as they struggled to hold the gate together, but Sir Andrew then did the same as Artorias and threw himself against the gate with a loud thud. Again, the gate shook and cracked, but it held.

The light of the glowing wards grew a bit dimmer, and Artorias attacked the gate again. The hinges of the door were torn from the wall, and the gate came crashing down, hitting the ground with a huge crash that could wake sleeping mountain giants.

The war party in the tree line several hundred feet down the mountain saw the gate come down and began charging up the mountain, with Asbjorn, Harald, and the men-at-arms front and center.

By now, the bandits were pouring out of their barracks buildings, and the infiltration party found themselves surrounded on three sides, with their backs against the now open gate.

Leon was firing his arrows into the crowd, while the rest of the team hurled themselves into the bandits. They abandoned all subtlety and began using their magic in earnest. Freyja and the squires weren't strong enough mages to call upon anything more than body enhancement magic, but Torfinn and the knights began unleashing their own power.

Torfinn and Sir Andrew were earth mages, and their skin hardened into stone while the ground shook beneath them. Their strength was raised a great deal in that state, and they barreled into the bandits like rolling boulders over grass.

Dame Sheira was an ice mage, and she conjured three large ice spikes that thrust out alongside her spear, impaling any unfortunate bandit she saw.

Sir Roger put away his daggers and drew his mace. He was a fire mage, and the head of the mace became wreathed in flame. There was a small fiery explosion every time he slammed the mace into one of the bandits, and they would erupt into a pillar of fire while screaming and flailing.

Sir Roland was a light mage, and with every swing of his sword, he would emit a bright beam that would slice clean through several bandits before dissipating.

Artorias was the only one strong enough to use his magic who didn't call upon it. He simply used his vastly superior speed and strength to cleave through handfuls of bandits at a time.

This was a horrifying sight for the bandits. They were being cut down, burned alive, impaled on ice spikes, and crushed in droves, and as if to compound their terror, the rest of the war party had reached the fort. The warriors and men-at-arms poured through the open gates and filled in the gaps between the infiltration team. Even more warriors had taken to climbing over the walls rather than bunch up at the gate, and though they were comparatively few, the bandits found themselves being surrounded.

"What the hell is going on out here?!" A booming voice was heard from the cave at the back of the fort. Eight more men ran outside from the cave, but these were no ordinary bandits. These were clearly the leaders, as they had significantly more expensive looking clothes, while one man was even wearing a pair of ornate golden rings, each set with a large ruby that gently pulsed with a magical light. All but three of these men were fourth-tier mages, while the man with the ruby rings and the two at his side were of the fifth-tier.

Seeing the chaos, they immediately drew their swords and jumped into the fray. They were closely followed by a seemingly endless flood of more bandits rushing out of the cave to reinforce their comrades.

Three of the fourth-tier bandits charged at the three thanes, tying them down and preventing them from continuing their slaughter. The other two challenged Sir Andrew, while two of the fifth-tier bandits went after Dame Sheira and Sir Roger. This left the bandit leader, the man with the ruby rings. He didn't attack anyone specific, he simply threw himself into the melee and began hacking away at the Valemén.

With a few swings of his sword, the bandit leader caused large rock spikes to erupt from the ground, impaling many of the warriors. He then caught sight of two of the men-at-arms, fighting side-by-side against the bandits. He smiled and crossed the thirty feet between them with a single leap. He swung his sword once more, and nearly split both in half, killing them instantly.

Suddenly, he quickly side-stepped, just as Torfinn's ax was about to come down on his head. Torfinn smashed into the ground and glared at the bandit leader. The leader smiled at him, and swung his sword, causing more rock spikes to shoot up from the ground, but they shattered once they hit Torfinn's hardened skin.

With all the leaders engaged in battle, the warriors and bandits did their best to keep their distance, but the battle still raged between the barracks buildings. The battle lines blurred, and the fort became a chaotic melee of whirling blades and spilled blood. The bandits had numbers on their side, as more just kept coming from the cave, but the warriors still had Artorias, Roland, Leon, and the squires.

Chapter 23: The Raid II

Artorias smiled, surrounded by corpses. The bandits had made a ring around him, with none willing to attack. It didn't take long for them to realize that he was far beyond any of them, and to engage him in battle would be tantamount to suicide.

One bandit, a little slower in the head than the rest, rushed out from behind Artorias. The mage turned into a blur and returned to his previous position before any of the others could react, and the attacking bandit hardly even realized he was dead as his severed head fell to the ground.

The squires were fighting side-by-side, trying to maintain something akin to battle lines even as the warriors charged into the mass of bandits that had only just now finished spewing out of the cave. A group of bandits threw themselves at the squires, but quick sword work forced them back and even left two dead.

One bandit, a second-tier mage, ran forward. He swung his sword at Victoria, aiming for her throat, but Victoria was saved by her quick reflexes as she just barely managed to block. She rotated her wrist, spinning the bandit's blade away from her, while Luke took advantage of the opening and thrust his own sword deep into the bandit's stomach. The man fell, but the rest of the bandits attacked again.

Kevin and John were holding their own, and Luke and Victoria worked together flawlessly, covering each other and watching each other's back. But, as the bandits pushed, the two pairs began to be separated, and the bandits moved to surround them. Luke deflected a spear thrust towards his chest, but a bandit to his side hacked at his exposed arm.

Luke gritted his teeth and braced for the pain. He didn't think this bandit would be able to completely chop off his arm since the bandit didn't seem to be stronger than a first-tier mage, but he would most definitely do some heavy damage. Luke heard a whistling sound for a split second, and an arrow buried itself in the bandit's chest, piercing clean through to the heart. The bandit's sword strike never landed, and he fell, dead before he hit the ground.

Luke couldn't turn to see who had fired the arrow, there were too many bandits around for him to divert his attention, but he thought he knew who fired it. His suspicions were confirmed as Leon ran over, sword in hand, and hurled himself against the bandits between the squires.

Killing that bandit had taken Leon's last arrow, so he had slung his bow and ran over to fill the widening gap between Luke on the right and John on the left. Artorias had taught Leon to never hold back, so Leon swung his sword with all the force he could muster. The bandit on the receiving end of the blow tried to block, but his own sword was knocked out of his hand and Leon's blade fell down upon him. The blade sunk into his shoulder and nearly came all the way down to his heart.

"Yeah!" Luke shouted as he saw Leon's first strike. "Thanks for that!"

But Leon just smiled and continued attacking the bandits. With him closing the gap and providing some support, the squires regained their footing and stopped being forced back and held against the tide of bandits crashing down upon them.

Not far away, Dame Sheira and Sir Roger were fighting side-by-side against their opponents. They were fighting with the two fifth-tier bandits who had come from the cave, and both proved to be tricky opponents.

Dame Sheira was unable to continue launching her ice spikes, as the warriors were mixing together with the bandits as they fought, and any miss of hers could hit an ally. Her opponent took advantage of this, along with the vastly increased speed that came with being a wind mage, and danced circles around her. She was unable to do much of anything, except block against his vicious attacks.

Sir Roger was faring a little better, even getting in a few hits, but his bandit was a fire mage just like he was, so his fiery mace had little effect. As the two continuously exchanged blows, their only thoughts were *'this is going to be an endurance match, the one who runs low on magic first will lose'*.

But this wasn't going to be an endurance match. The bandit threw a small fireball at Sir Roger, trying to distract him enough to inflict a little damage with his sword. Sir Roger blocked the fireball with a swing of his mace, following through and hitting the ground, creating a small explosion that threw the bandit back. As the bandit tried to recover his footing, he saw a blinding flash of light in the corner of his eye, and everything went dark.

Roland had turned his attention away from the mass of bandits and fired a beam of light from his sword at the bandit, piercing straight through his eye and vaporizing the bandit's brain. Sir Roger was briefly stunned, as he had been about to take advantage of the bandit's loss of footing, but quickly recovered. He turned and nodded to Roland, as the paladin sliced through three more bandits and ran over.

Together, the two joined Dame Sheira. Just before this, the lady knight had thrust her spear into the ground, a foolish move that would all but disarm anyone else, but Dame Sheira knew what she was

doing. The wind mage she was fighting was too fast, and he was starting to get a read on her movements, as she felt the air was starting to vibrate and throw off her defense. Her only option now was to use her magic in a different way.

The bandit saw her thrusting the spear into the ground, and lunged forward, aiming for Dame Sheira's throat. Just as he got within range, he felt his foot slip when it hit the ground, and he ended up sliding forward and falling flat onto a layer of ice emanating from the spear tip. Dame Sheira smiled at him, and raised her spear, not wasting a second before thrusting into the bandit's chest.

"Good work! Now go help the others!" shouted Roland.

The knights nodded, and Sir Roger moved to assist Sir Andrew, while Dame Sheira left to support the thanes. The two fourth-tier mages were just barely enough to tie down Sir Andrew, but with Sir Roger reinforcing him, the bandits were quickly overpowered and killed. Likewise, the three other fourth-tier bandits were a match for the three fourth-tier thanes, but as Dame Sheira arrived, the balance quickly tipped in favor of the warriors.

"You damn barbarians!" shouted the bandit leader. He swung his sword in a vertical slash, and when it hit the ground, a row of rock spikes began erupting from the ground. Torfinn easily dodged them, but the warriors behind him were not so lucky. Three warriors were killed, while five more were injured.

Torfinn grit his teeth in rage and held his ax so tight that his stony knuckles turned white. He roared and charged at the bandit leader. He swung his ax with as much force as he could muster, but the bandit leader ducked and weaved around them, striking at Torfinn's exposed stomach as he did so. Fortunately, Torfinn's rock armor was barely even scratched, and he kept swinging.

Most of the benefits of earth magic were greatly increased strength, at the cost of speed, but the bandit leader seemed to buck this trend. Torfinn swung again and again, but he hit nothing but air. The bandit leader, for his part, took every opportunity to hit Torfinn. The calves, shoulders, an exposed elbow when Torfinn overswung, he missed none of them. But every time, he would only chip off a little bit of rock, and Torfinn would keep swinging.

Torfinn's fighting style left few true openings for the bandit leader to exploit, with only his rocky armor exposed, which left the bandit increasingly frustrated. He could also see his allies being cut down one by one, which had him feeling desperate to finish off Torfinn quickly.

"I'll kill you!" Torfinn shouted, his killing intent soaring, even to the point of making many of the weaker bandits in his vicinity queasy. The warriors didn't miss a beat, cutting down the bandits in their moment of weakness, but the bandit leader was unaffected.

Torfinn raised his ax, and swung downwards at him, putting every ounce of his prodigious strength behind it. The bandit leader wasn't stupid enough to take that hit and jumped back as fast as he could. The ax passed by his face so close it shaved off a few of his hairs, but the bandit leader had just barely made it. The ax hit the ground, and large cracks spread out like a spider web.

He took a few more steps back, then made a risky move. He dropped down low, placing his free hand on the ground. Torfinn, in his rage, continued moving forward, intent on pressing the bandit leader, when small rock spikes suddenly shot out from the ground, aimed at Torfinn's leg. They weren't meant to do any real damage to the tribal chief, and their sharp points even shattered when trying to impale

Torfinn's leg, but they trapped his foot just as Torfinn was taking a step. The chief fell, just barely catching himself before his face hit the ground.

The bandit leader wasn't going to miss this opportunity and kicked Torfinn down just as he was trying to rise. He raised his sword above Torfinn, preparing to put all of his weight behind it and drive it into the back of Torfinn's skull when a bright light illuminated everything behind him.

This light was Roland's sword, shining like a hundred magic street lanterns. The paladin had moved to assist Torfinn just as the chief ran into trouble and arrived just in time. The bandit leader didn't even have time to bring his sword down before Roland's bright blade removed both of his arms, only leaving a pair of slightly smoking stumps.

The bandit leader fell, screaming in pain. Torfinn immediately wrenched his foot free of the rock spikes holding it down and grabbed his ax. He raised it above him and brought it down upon the bandit leader's head so hard that the ground beneath it shattered.

By now, the bandits were thoroughly demoralized, and with their strongest fighters dead, they were quickly finished off. It took a few minutes of clean-up, but the entire open-air portion of the fort was completely secured.

There wasn't a single warrior without a bloodied weapon, and many were already thinking about how to describe their glorious victory.

Leon and the squire's performance during the battle were equally glorious. They had killed half a dozen bandits apiece and were surrounded by the proof. The knights and thanes had cut clean through the bandits after the leaders were killed, and the warriors had wrapped things up from there, surrounding and pushing the bandits into a tight group that they dispatched quite quickly.

But none were as astonishing as Artorias. He was standing amid a pile of about two to three dozen dead bandits, with not a single hair out of place, smiling serenely like he was out on a stroll through a summer meadow.

But despite the fighting dying down, the job wasn't done. Two of Dame Sheira's men-at-arms went and secured the entrance to the cave, while Roland examined the runes carved into it. After determining that they only scattered magic senses and didn't have any dangerous function, Roland ordered the men-at-arms to follow him in taking the cave. They were followed by Torfinn, his thanes, and half a dozen third-tier warriors.

Everyone was on high alert, they didn't know what was in the cave and weren't too keen on being ambushed. Fortunately, nothing jumped out at them, and after a short walk, they found themselves in a large well-lit and furnished cavern. There were couches, tables, chairs, dressers, carpets on the floor, and a multitude of magic lanterns illuminating the place.

The group quickly determined that there weren't any more bandits hiding in there and moved on to the doors. There were three on one side, and three more on the opposite. The three on the right side were just the bedrooms for the bandit leaders, with little of note within. The other three, however, were a much different story.

One opened into another large cavern, filled with food and large crates packed full of raw silkgrass. This was presumably the loot that had been taken from the raided village. Another opened onto the largest cavern yet, with space and furniture to fit over three hundred bandits, though it was clear that all the bunks weren't being used. The last door led to a long flight of stairs, descending further into the mountain. While the third-tier warriors secured the living quarters, Roland, Torfinn, and the thanes followed the stairs.

At the bottom, they found twenty large prison cells, full of frightened tribesmen. They had been kept in near perpetual darkness for several days now, so they recoiled back when the door opened and squinted as light from the stairway flooded into the prison.

The knights and warriors stared in shock for a moment, before immediately rushing to open the cell doors. When the doors were opened, the tribesmen continued to shrink back in fear, until one older man's eyes finally grew accustomed to the light, and he could see the warriors.

"Chief Torfinn? Is that you?"

"Yes, yes it is." Torfinn didn't know the man's name, but he quickly came forward to help him to his feet.

As the old man got a better look at Torfinn, he allowed himself to believe his eyes and started crying with joy.

"Everyone! The Brown Bear warriors came for us!"

With that, the frightened tribesmen relaxed and allowed the warriors to lead them out of their cells. As the knowledge that they were now safe sank in, they too began to cry, some in joy at being rescued, and some in sorrow at remembering everyone killed when the bandits attacked their village.

Torfinn walked up to Roland, who was helping the last of the villagers out of the cells. He had a serious look in his eye, and what he said shocked Roland.

"I'd like to apologize to you, knight. When you arrived in Valetown, I was quite rude to you, as were my people. If it weren't for you, not only would I probably not have rescued my people, but those fifth-tier warriors the bandits had would have killed the entire war party." Torfinn pulled Roland into a brief hug but didn't release Roland's shoulders after it was over.

"You saved my life during the battle. You have proven yourself to be a friend to the Brown Bear Tribe." Torfinn pulled Roland into another brief hug before finally releasing the paladin. "We're going to escort these villagers back to their homes, then the war party will return to Vale Town. When we return, I'll fulfill my side of the bargain, and provide you with a guide to the Heartwood Trees you seek."

Chapter 24: The Guide

Torfinn's abject gratitude left Roland feeling awkward and searching for words.

"Thank you... I only did what anyone would have done... There's no need for apologies..." Roland just rattled off a series of humble words, until Torfinn waved his hand and cut him off.

"Come! Let's go see what can be looted from the bandits!" Torfinn decided to just cut things off there, letting Roland relax a little.

Back in the main living space of the bandit cave, Roland found an anxious Luke.

"Sir Roland! Dame Sheira found a noble insignia among the things of those fifth-tier bandits!"

"*What?* Where is she?"

Luke led Roland and Torfinn, who had just come up the stairs with Roland, into the bandit leader's room, where Dame Sheira was waiting. There were no words that needed to be said, she simply gestured at a nearby table, where a number of things like shirts, tabards, a decorative shield, and a small banner could be seen.

Roland rushed over to examine them. They all followed the same color scheme, dark red with a prominent design of an orange four-petaled flower. Roland knew who this sigil signified. He carefully looked over each item to be sure, then muttered, "Marquis Grandison..."

"Who's that?" asked Torfinn from behind him.

"A landed noble just on the other side of the Frozen Mountains. If these bandits had their hands on his sigil, then that means they were likely knights in his service." Roland frowned.

Fortunately, Torfinn didn't seem particularly angry. The bandits were dead, and that was what counted, for now at least.

"I won't make that big a deal out of this, knight, on one condition."

"Name it."

"When you return south, you bring justice to this 'Grandison'."

"Of course. I will report his activities to those with the power to sanction him. My kingdom considers your tribe to be a friend, and his hostile actions against the king's friends will not be tolerated."

"... I suppose that's the best I'm going to get, isn't it?" Torfinn sighed. Well, the bandits were gone, and the pass they used to come north would be easily sealed by a few mountain scouts causing some avalanches. There were more immediate problems in the west of the vale, so it was best to just leave it at that.

Torfinn and the knights left the cave. The warriors were relaxing and celebrating their victory, but the villagers weren't so happy. It was true that they had been saved, but almost every adult man had been killed when the bandits raided their village, so things were going to be hard for a while.

Roland and the knights went to relax but were pulled into the modest victory celebrations with the warriors, joining the men-at-arms who had already been dragged over. Sir Roger was the only exception, as he was busy tending to the bodies of the two fallen men-at-arms, as both had been his. He made a crude sleigh, like what Artorias and Leon used to carry their furs and lifted the two bodies onto it.

Torfinn, meanwhile, spoke to the village elder, promising that all the food and silkgrass that the bandits had looted would be returned. A brief inventory taken by Harald indicated that there would plenty of loot left over afterward, so Torfinn wasn't worried about feeding his war party after the few supplies they brought with had been used.

"Freyja!" The warriors had collected the bodies, and a few were busy burning them. Freyja was supervising them, but when she heard Torfinn's call, she quickly ran over.

Torfinn watched as the fire slowly spread over the bodies of his warriors for a moment, before turning to Freyja. "How many did we lose?"

"Seventy-two. But the Thunderbirds now lead them to the Sky Mother atop three hundred and ninety-five slain bandits."

"They feast with their ancestors tonight. As for us, let's rest a little for the rest of the night, and get going by morning. I want to bring the villagers home by midday, and then we hurry back to Vale Town. I doubt Hakon Fire-Beard has made a move in the three days we've been gone, but we still ought to return as soon as possible."

"Right. We'll get to it."

By now, the moon had reached its zenith and was beginning its descent. The warriors were quite tired, having stayed awake for so long, so the victory celebrations died down after less than an hour, as everyone fell asleep.

Roland was one of the last to close his eyes, as he was looking for Artorias, but it seemed that the man and his son had disappeared after the battle. Even the squires didn't notice when Leon had left, and he had been right next to them during the battle.

Roland simply sighed and decided to give up trying to talk with Artorias, as the man clearly didn't want to talk to anyone else. The paladin lay down next to his knights and allowed himself to drift off to sleep.

But Artorias and Leon weren't too far away. They had left the fort, and were now in the nearby forest, resting among the trees. If anyone wanted to look for them, it wouldn't have been too difficult, as they even had a small fire burning, to stave off the nighttime chill that descends upon the Northern Vales.

"You fought admirably, little lion. I couldn't be more proud." Artorias beamed at his son, while Leon grew bright red from embarrassment, as he had never been able to take compliments very well.

"Thanks, Dad."

"How do you feel about it? Your first battle, I mean."

Leon calmed down, and his face shifted from pure embarrassment to a more subdued smile.

"... It was exhilarating. I was scared the whole time, and my heart nearly leaped out my chest from how fast it was beating, but I don't think I've ever felt so... I don't know, it's hard to describe."

"I understand. After my first battle, I was so amped up that I could hardly sit still for the next week. It wasn't even that large a thing, either, just a few of my father's knights and myself, facing down two dozen highwaymen. I think you even killed more bandits today than I did back then."

"Oh? How long ago was that?"

"About seventeen or eighteen years ago, I think. I wasn't too much older than you, at the time. In fact, after it was over, the man I was squiring for knighted me, and I left the Great Plateau not too long after

that... Anyways, you did a fantastic job. You even fought alongside those squires! You've definitely earned that sword." Artorias glanced at the sword that Leon still held, and the younger man held it a little closer with a proud smile on his face.

The two settled in for the rest of the night and left late in the morning. They woke up when the war party marched down the path alongside the villagers but didn't start the journey until after they had some good breakfast. It would take the war party three more days or so before they would return to Vale Town, but the two of them could move much faster without the first-tier and below warriors that Torfinn had with him, so they weren't going to rush.

When they did finally start moving, they left at a brisk pace, reaching the village not long after the war party, but they didn't stay. Instead, they continued onward and arrived at a large hill a few miles away from Vale Town by the end of the day. They waited there for two days, spending those days training and meditating until they could see the war party on the horizon.

Artorias nodded his head towards the returning warriors, and once Leon was ready, they left the hill without saying a word.

The warriors returned to Vale Town, and the entire city succumbed to the celebratory attitude and was partying by the evening. Even the priests came out of their temples to celebrate with the chief.

Torfinn had organized a small feast for the best of his warriors and had begun giving out rewards for the warriors who distinguished themselves in the battle. Of course, Artorias and Leon were nowhere to be seen, as parties weren't their thing, but Torfinn didn't mind, he'd already spoken to Artorias for a few minutes after arriving at his longhouse. Roland's party was present, however, and were even drinking with the warriors, a far cry from just a week ago when everything had been done to make them feel unwelcome.

In a rare moment, Torfinn had decided to break out his big chair and sat in a small raised alcove that was usually blocked from view by a thin curtain. He didn't much like sitting so far from his warriors, as celebrating with them couldn't be done when he separated himself but doling out rewards demands a certain etiquette that he didn't want to break.

"Niklas! Come forward!" Torfinn's booming voice was heard even over the drunk merchants and rowdy warriors. In response, one of the drunkest and rowdiest of the warriors came forward, stopping before Torfinn.

"You killed over fifteen of those bandits, this merits a great reward!" The watching warriors shouted and roared in approval, while the merchants and priests clapped and stamped their feet.

Torfinn reached into a box right beside his chair and pulled out a metal band. "I give you this, an enchanted iron arm ring I found in the bandit cave. I had those knights take a look at it, and it seems that this thing can slightly amplify the magic flowing through your arm, strengthening the effect of that magic." Torfinn held out the arm ring, and Niklas gratefully accepted it, to the applause of the rest of the crowd. He quickly rejoined his fellows after thanking the chief.

Torfinn looked directly at Roland and waved him over. "Now, then, Sir Knight, you come forward."

Roland looked a little hesitant but came forward anyway.

"I must give you a reward for your assistance in dealing with those bandits. Tell me, what can I do for you?"

Roland gave the chief a smile and a curt reply. "Your friendship and that guide you promised is all the reward necessary."

"Nonsense! I must give you something, or what would my warriors think of me?" Torfinn smiled down at Roland, and the warriors around the hall began stomping their feet and making noise, supporting Torfinn rewarding Roland and his party.

Roland looked back at his knights, and they all smiled and nodded at him. "Very well, Chief Torfinn, if you insist, then perhaps a couple bundles of silkgrass?"

Torfinn laughed uproariously, as did most of the hall. "A *couple*? I'll give each of your people three large bundles, how about that?"

Roland sighed. He truly didn't want a reward, he only wanted to find some Heartwood amber.

"You're too kind."

"As for your guide, I've already spoken to him. He'll be heading east tomorrow morning, so wait at the temple on the largest hill in that direction, and he'll meet you there a couple hours after dawn. I wouldn't delay too long in getting there, either, as this man won't wait too long for you."

Only now did Roland feel some joy. A relieved expression broke out on his face, and he stepped back from Torfinn. The entire rest of the hall had gone silent when Torfinn brought up their guide and where he would be taking them, however, Roland didn't seem to notice.

After Roland rejoined his party at their table, Torfinn continued handing out rewards.

"Freyja! Asbjorn! Come forward! I give each of you one of these ruby rings from the bandit leader. They supposedly store magic, supplementing your own magic reserves in battle..."

—

Roland and his party rose at dawn. Torfinn graciously accepted their request to have someone watch over the bodies of their two comrades who fell during the battle, so there were a few warriors around the storehouse as they left.

"Sir, the chief didn't ever tell you where this guide would be taking us, did he?" Luke had taken note of the reactions of the tribesmen the previous night. He noticed their tightening faces and their slightly fearful looks.

"Nothing specific, he only said 'east'."

"Hmmm. Those tribesmen were acting odd when he told you where to meet the guide. I've just got a bad feeling about this..."

Roland frowned and looked pensive for a moment.

"Hey, this guy isn't losing his nerve, is he?" Adrianos, the noble man-at-arms, asked from behind with a playful tone.

“What? No, I’m just a little put off by their behavior.” Luke hurriedly defended himself.

“Don’t worry, boy. We’ll get this done and be back south in proper civilization in no time.” Adrianos threw his arm around Luke’s shoulders and pulled back with the other men-at-arms.

Luke’s words weren’t easily dismissed from Roland’s mind, though. He didn’t pay much attention to the other warriors in the hall, but Luke was quite perceptive, and he wouldn’t exaggerate these things. If he felt the need to speak up, then he must really be feeling apprehensive.

But, Roland was a paladin, and he had a job to do. He would trust that Torfinn was above board for now, and if anything too shady happened, they would return to Vale Town and have words with the chief.

There was a cluster of hills just to the east of Vale Town, and on the largest, the tribesmen had built a small temple of stone. It had a roof open to the sky and was filled with various carved statues, most of various legendary warriors, but there was one in the back of the temple, directly next to the sacrificial altar that drew Roland’s eyes. This statue wasn’t as large as the others, but it was far more intricately carved. It was of a large bird taking flight with a horned serpent in its talons. Every scale and feather was visible, and Roland couldn’t help but marvel at the amount of detail put into this statue. Nothing else in the temple was particularly noteworthy to the party, as they had all seen so much more in the south, but this statue was almost lifelike, and it captivated Roland.

The temple was empty when they arrived. Roland surmised that the promised guide simply hadn’t arrived yet, so he spent his time admiring this bird statue. It wasn’t obvious to him what the bird was, but it was clearly of importance to the tribesmen given its workmanship and place of prominence.

“That is the Thunderbird, a holy symbol to the Valemén.” A voice rang out through the temple from behind Roland. He spun to see who the speaker was and found Artorias and Leon staring back at him from the temple entrance.

Chapter 25: Going East

Artorias’ sudden appearance made Roland do a quick double-take.

“What?”

“That statue you’re looking at, it’s of a Thunderbird.”

Roland quickly collected himself. He was so transfixed at the quality of the statue, that he had been nearly startled out of his skin.

“Oh... It is a truly spectacular piece of art. And, come to think of it, there are similar depictions of Thunderbirds in the cities of the Great Plateau, just south of the Frozen Mountains.”

Artorias smiled at Roland. “Indeed, they come from similar legends. It’s probable that the people of the Plateau and the Valemén share ancestors, who passed their stories on to their children.”

“...Makes sense.” Roland tore his eyes away from the statue. The rest of his knights had been meditating or resting while waiting for their guide, and now they were getting up and preparing to move out. It was clear that they had the same assumption that Roland now found himself making.

“You two are our guides, I take it?”

“Indeed. We’ll be taking you east, through a pass in the Frozen Mountains, into the neighboring vale, and then on to a Heartwood Glade. The trees there are incredibly ancient, and I all but guarantee that you’ll find some amber there.”

Roland was ecstatic, but he clamped down on his excitement, as he preferred to indulge in those emotions only when the job was done.

“Good. Then we’ll be in your capable hands.”

It didn’t take the party long to ready themselves, as they were waiting when Artorias and Leon arrived. They set off in good time, due east.

Artorias and Leon led the way, moving quickly, but not so much that Roland and his party were annoyed. The squires were second-tier mages, as was Leon, so it was at their pace that the group traveled.

The first few hours passed in silence. The initial happiness at getting underway with their real mission had died down, with none of the party willing to let their guard down in front of their guides. No one knew where they were from, or even their real names. The squires had fought alongside Leon during the raid on the bandit fort, so there were some good sentiments there, but Artorias was another story. There had been no real introductions to break the ice, either, as Artorias had insisted that they leave as soon as everyone looked ready, so everyone still only knew the two as Wraith Killer and Little Lion.

So, the silence continued.

Roland was the one who finally broke the silence. The two guides had an aloof air to them, preferring to stay separate from the party, but Roland couldn’t stand awkward silences, so he sped up a bit, and caught up with Artorias.

“So... I heard the tribesmen call you ‘Wraith Killer’. Do you have a nickname or anything shorter we can call you?”

Artorias glanced over at Roland and thought for a while.

“Hmm...” His face began to curve into a frown, and Roland could sense Artorias’ aura begin to roil and churn.

“I-It’s no problem if you don’t! We can call you Wraith Killer if you want.”

“No... No, it’s fine. I suppose you can call me Artorias.”

“Ah! Artorias, that’s a good name.” Roland smiled and continued to converse, but he didn’t notice that behind him, Adrianos had overheard Artorias state his name, and suddenly started looking their way and paying attention to the conversation.

“So, where do you come from? You don’t have the same accent as the tribesmen, and you certainly don’t look much like them, either.” One of the first things that Roland noticed about Artorias that didn’t

quite seem right was the lack of facial hair. Almost every tribesman had some kind of facial hair, but Artorias was completely clean shaven.

“Why are you so curious, Sir Roland? Who I am and where I come from ought to be of no concern to a paladin.”

“You’re clearly very strong, and you don’t come from the vales, so I’m just curious about why you would come so far north.”

Artorias wasn’t quite sure how to respond. He didn’t want them to know who he was, but he was a naturally friendly person, even if his circumstances had forced him and his son out into the wilds for so long.

“Training. We came here to train.”

“Can’t you train down south? There are plenty of good mage guilds that would gladly take in and finance your training, I’m sure of it. Why don’t you come with us when we go back south, I can- “

“No!” Artorias cut off Roland, and the paladin felt a wave of killing intent wash over him, and he felt like he had been submerged in a freezing lake. But, the killing intent was gone as quickly as it had come, and Artorias looked a little embarrassed.

“Ahem. Sorry about that. We’re not going back south. That’s the end of it.”

Roland was shocked at Artorias’ reaction. He had been trying to offer the man a position back in the capital, and even the possibility of a knighthood. In fact, Roland firmly believed that Artorias was much stronger than he was, so there was even a good chance that if he came south, he would be made a paladin.

“... I should be apologizing, not you. I perhaps overstepped the limits of our relationship, and I apologize for that. Please, disregard my previous statement.”

Artorias smiled back at Roland. The group had stopped moving, and Leon was watching Artorias with an alarmed look on his face. Artorias looked over at his son, and nodded to him, showing the younger man that he was all right. Leon gave a slight nod in response, and slowly turned back around and continued onwards.

“Listen, Sir Roland, we ought to speak of the dangers of where we’re going. If all goes well, then we won’t encounter anything of note, but we should still plan for what may happen if all doesn’t go well.”

“I’m all ears, Artorias. Any advice you can give us would be most appreciated.”

“Good. First off, we’re only going to travel during the daytime. We’ll arrive at the pass before the day’s over at this pace, and that’s where we’ll spend the night. We could proceed further into the eastern vale, but there are a number of creatures we’ll want to avoid that come out at night. Ice wraiths and banshees are the two big ones, but there are also packs of wind wolves and tree sprites to watch out for.”

Roland frowned. “How would we avoid these creatures at night, then, or will we be able to reach this glade then leave the vale in a single day?”

“We’ll make for my home. My son and I live there, and we warded our small fort to repel those nocturnal creatures. I know a few temporary wards that could be used if we are caught away from the fort during the night, but they won’t cover up the presence of so many people. We’ll make for our fort, then the glade, then back to the fort, and finally the mountain pass. All told, it shouldn’t take more than three more days.”

“Then I thank you in advance for allowing us to stay at your place.”

The two men continued chatting about the eastern vale, with Adrianos listening in the whole time. Leon continued to lead the group east, while the others in Roland’s party talked amongst themselves.

They kept walking east and reached the pass in good time. The group pressed on, as Artorias wanted them to camp near the eastern end of the pass, not quite close enough to provoke any of the beasts in the Forest of Black and White, but he didn’t want to waste time tomorrow either.

Fortunately, this mountain pass was nowhere near as harsh as what the knights had experienced coming north. There were no frozen forests, no fields of sharp jagged stone they had to climb through, and no sheer cliffs they had to scale. It was just a thin rocky path, just wide enough for two of them to walk side-by-side.

The place they decided to camp was a slightly wider part of the pass, and they all settled in for a peaceful night.

The following day saw the group arrive in the Forest of Black and White. Roland and his group were struck by the beauty of the place, with so many colorful trees and plants. But, Roland remembered Artorias’ warnings about the creatures in the forest, and the need to get to his fort as quickly as possible, so he kept the team moving.

The forest was thinner near the edges, so it was quite the pleasant walk at first. There was a gorgeous canopy of green, blue, and even the rare red or purple leaves, and the plants and flowers they saw around had equally diverse colors. Even the nobles in the party were awed, as it would take an experienced gardener a long time to bring such vibrant colors out of an estate’s garden.

But what truly struck the group was the Divine Scar. It was near midday when they approached it, and the trees were still thin on the western side of the Scar, so they saw it from a good distance away.

“What is that?” One of the men-at-arms shouted in wonder.

“I call this canyon the Divine Scar. It’s very deep, and it gets wider as you go south. It possesses a unique aura I couldn’t identify which made me think that an absurdly powerful mage made it with an attack.”

Roland walked up to the edge and stared down towards the bottom. He was a sixth-tier mage, and his eyesight was superhuman, but even he could only see a deep black abyss. It gave him an eerie feeling, like even his light magic would hit that darkness and be completely swallowed.

Artorias and Leon seemed a little impatient but gave the rest of the group time to admire the immense canyon, but Adrianos seemed a little unimpressed. In fact, he was looking around, completely bored and ready to continue. But he saw something odd out of the corner of his eye, so he spun his head

around to have a better look and saw the branch of a nearby tree extending out like an arm, and reached for one of Sir Andrew's men-at-arms, so quietly that the man didn't seem to realize it.

"Connor! Get away from that tree!" Adrianos shouted out and drew his sword.

The tree didn't seem to like that shout, as it abandoned stealth and wrapped its 'arm' around Connor. The man didn't even have a chance to fight back as he was lifted off his feet and held more than twenty feet in the air.

The tree was a gnarled and ugly thing, leafless and rotten, but showed an unexpected resilience when Adrianos brought his sword down on the branch-arm and left nothing more than a slight scratch on the bark.

The others drew their own weapons, but Sir Roger was the closest. He brought his mace to bear, and slammed it into the trunk of the tree, allowing his fire magic to ignite the mace and scorch the bark. Surprisingly, the fire had little effect.

Connor began screaming, as the branch tightened around him. He felt his arms begin to crack, followed by his ribs.

The tree had three more branches and began to wave them exceptionally fast at the party, forcing them back and away from the trunk.

"This damn thing!" Sir Andrew's pale skin darkened to a greyish hue and hardened into stone. He channeled all the magic he could into his arms and lifted his battle-ax. He charged forward, allowing the tree branches to fall on him, chipping off a few pieces of stone, but otherwise leaving him unharmed. He swung his ax with all his might and slammed it into the tree.

The ax blade didn't chop too far into the tree trunk, but a few more swings brought the blade almost halfway through the trunk. The wild branches seized up, and immediately stopped moving. Connor was dropped from the air and hit the ground with a sickening crack.

From the trunk of the tree, a brown bark-like head emerged. It was wide and flat, with no facial features save for two black eyes the size of eagle's eggs. The head was followed by the upper half of a very tall but very thin body. The entire creature seemed to be made of the same bark as the tree.

Nothing more emerged from the tree. It seemed that Sir Andrew had cut the creature in half when he struck it, as it was missing everything below the waist.

"What in the name of the ancestors is *that*?" Sir Roger exclaimed.

"That is a tree sprite. Not very strong, but exceptionally skilled with nature magic, and deadly if they catch you off guard." Artorias replied, nodding towards Connor, who was now coughing up blood and struggling to rise.

"Stay down, Connor. Let me take a look." Sir Andrew had gone to the side of his man-at-arms and was running his hands over the man's body, looking for blood.

"He's going to die. There's nothing you can do." Leon bluntly stated.

Sir Andrew glared at the young man. “*What?* There are only some broken bones. A little bleeding in his lungs, but he’ll be fine once we get him to proper healers in the south.”

“No, my son is correct. Tree sprites like to poison their victims. He’s going to die, and in great agony too.” Artorias backed up Leon. “Check the back of his head.”

Sir Andrew gave the two a dirty look but did as Artorias suggested. When he tried to turn Connor’s head, he felt a wet sensation and noticed his hands were covered in blood. The back of the man’s head had numerous pinpricks that were oozing blood, and the skin around them was rapidly turning blue.

“What is this?” The knight recoiled and wiped his hand off on a nearby fern.

“That is a nasty neurotoxin. It slowly breaks down the victim’s brain, and they are awake and aware the whole time. It’s a bad way to go.” Artorias looked over at Roland, who had come forward to examine the man himself. “You need to decide what to do with him, and quickly. We can’t delay too long, or we won’t make it to my fort before dark.”

Roland simply answered, “I understand.”

Chapter 26: Identity

“We can’t just kill him! We can bring him with us, we can get him help!” Sir Andrew shouted at his comrades. Connor was his man-at-arms, and they had fought alongside one another for years. Killing him on the word of Artorias was out of the question in his mind.

“Look at him, he’s obviously suffering! We can’t help him now, and he’ll die before we get very far carrying him.” Dame Sheira was for giving Connor a mercy kill.

“Indeed. Best to end it now.” Sir Roger agreed.

“He’s my friend! I won’t just let him die like this, just because *he* says so!” But Sir Andrew wasn’t having any of it, and even started directing his anger at Artorias.

Leon and Artorias had given the knights some distance and were now watching their argument, all while the subject of the discussion continued to writhe in agony and cough up more blood. When Sir Andrew called out Artorias, Artorias didn’t even react. He was waiting for Roland to make a decision and was starting to get impatient. Leon was more blatant about his desire to get moving, constantly checking the sun’s position and looking out into the forest. It was almost midday, and they still had a good deal of ground to cover.

Leon looked at his father, silently asking what to do.

“Just wait, little lion. Whatever happens, we’ll deal with it.”

“Sir Andrew, he’s suffering. It’s best to just get it over with.” Adrianos stepped forward and gave his opinion. He’d known Sir Andrew nearly as long as Connor had, and they were friends. Adrianos couldn’t just sit back and watch his friend die horribly, so he spoke his mind.

“No! Sir Roland, please, we can still save him, I’m sure of it.”

“Enough. I’ve made my decision.” Roland stepped forward and drew his sword. Sir Andrew had been standing in between Connor and the others, while Roland paced and tried to come to a decision, and now that he had, he wouldn’t hesitate.

“Sir, please!” but Sir Andrew still didn’t want to give up.

“Out of the way, Andy.” Roland stopped in front of the other knight and waited for him to move.

“Not going to happen. I’ll carry Connor back home myself if I have to.”

Roland sighed. “Look at him, Andy. Really look at him. Does he look like someone that can still be saved?” Roland spoke with a slow and calm tone, trying to soothe Sir Andrew’s frayed nerves, and get him to comply.

Sir Andrew looked back and saw Connor had stopped writhing and coughing. Instead, he was just lying there, looking more like a corpse than a living person. His ribs had been shattered by the tree sprite, and his chest was starting to cave in. He was covered in blood, and his skin was so pale it was almost transparent. The only thing that still showed he was still alive, was the sound of his rough and pained breathing.

Roland placed his hand on Sir Andrew’s shoulder. “He’s gone, my friend. Even if his heart is still beating, he’s gone. Let me end it.”

Sir Andrew grit his teeth, and slowly, reluctantly, stepped aside.

Roland gripped his sword tight, raised it above Connor, and drove it deep into what remained of the young man’s chest, killing him instantly.

Roland’s party was silent and solemn. They didn’t move and were just processing what had happened. At one moment, everyone was fine, and admiring the Divine Scar, and the next, a comrade had been taken by a tree sprite so quickly he hadn’t even the time to resist.

Artorias gave them a few minutes, and Leon grew still. Eventually, they felt that the silence had gone on long enough, and Artorias walked up to Roland.

“Losing a comrade is never easy, especially when they’re a friend. I get that, I truly do, but we need to get moving. Let’s grab his body and get moving. We can’t get caught out in the forest at night.”

Roland nodded and only took a few more seconds before jumping into action. First, he swung his sword at the tree the tree sprite had been inhabiting. With a burst of light, the tree was cut in half. Roland swung a few more times, and he had a wooden board, long and wide enough to carry Connor. He grabbed the young man’s body and hauled it onto the board. Sir Andrew and Adrianos then grabbed the ends, digging in to make handholds with their strong fingers, and lifted the board, with Connor on top.

It didn’t take too long, but Artorias was already starting to get anxious. Night falls quickly in the vales, and the sun wasn’t waiting around for them. Once everyone was ready, the group set off again, with Leon taking the lead.

Connor’s body wasn’t tied down, as they didn’t have anything to tie him down with, so the going was much slower than it was before.

The group was more somber, and there wasn't any talking. Everyone just stayed quiet and kept walking.

They went north, walking around the Divine Scar, then turned south-east, towards the purple grass clearing, and the fortified compound.

Artorias kept watch on the sky at all times, watching the sun slowly descend through the gaps in the trees. The sky turned from blue to pink, then to red, and the sun finally fell behind the mountains. The sky was still relatively bright, but the vale had been plunged into darkness, and the group was still in the forest.

Artorias hurried them along the best he could, but after losing another of their own, Roland's party had lost much of their motivation. Normally, battle-hardened soldiers like them wouldn't be so crushed by the loss of one man, but the forest weighed heavily upon them, and every step became a struggle.

"Shit! We need to go faster!" Artorias was on edge, and very nervous now. The sun was down, and the nocturnal creatures were beginning to stir. He spread his magic senses out as far as he could and kept alert for anything out of the ordinary.

Finally, the sun completely set, and the sky grew as dark as the forest, lit only by the moon and the stars orbiting distant planes.

Suddenly, Artorias spun around, drawing his sword, and staring into the depths of the forest. The others all drew their own weapons in response and took up a ready position. Leon had been walking several dozen feet ahead but fell back to the group. Sir Andrew and Adrianos carefully set Connor down and joined the others in forming a line facing the same direction as Artorias.

They all stood there, waiting for whatever Artorias had seen, for thirty seconds. Sir Roger was about to speak up, to ask what was out there, when they all felt a sharp drop in temperature.

Roland's eyes widened, as he saw an approaching fog surrounded by dark smoky shapes. He stole a glance at Artorias.

"Are those..."

"Ice Wraiths, and their pet banshees. A *lot* of them."

Once Roland asked his question, there was no doubt in anyone's mind that danger was approaching, so the knights began channeling their magic.

"You there, the ice mage." Artorias looked at Dame Sheira. "Your offensive magic will largely be useless; our opponents are beings of cold and dark."

Dame Sheira's face tightened in apprehension, and she stiffly nodded back to Artorias. She gripped her spear tighter, and ice spread out over arms, torso, and legs, forming armor. Whereas Sir Andrew could turn his skin into stone, retaining most of his mobility, Dame Sheira couldn't form icy armor on her joints, or it would severely slow her down in battle.

Out of the darkness came an earsplitting shriek. Roland's party had to force themselves not to drop their weapons and cover their ears. Leon and Artorias were more used to this, but Leon looked extremely uncomfortable, shaking and contorting his face in pain.

Artorias broke from the line and charged out into the forest. The others in the party watched in shock as he disappeared into the darkness, followed shortly by the sounds of steel colliding with hard surfaces, and more banshee screams.

Banshee screams can really screw with an unprepared mage, deafening them and sending the magic within their blood into turmoil and completely out of the mage's control. However, if a mage is expecting it, they can send magic into their ears and safeguard against the terrible sound. Thus, after the first few shrieks, the group was largely unaffected by them.

Unfortunately, Artorias wasn't able to hold off all of them, and those that slipped past him came flying out of the darkness and directly at the group. They were grotesque creatures, made up more of a smoky darkness than actual matter, with empty eye sockets, rotten faces, and dark, skeletal limbs. But, as terrifying and intimidating as they were, the knights were stronger.

Sir Roland, Sir Andrew, Dame Sheira, and Sir Roger all charged at the banshees, cutting them down with every swing of their weapons.

Leon edged closer to the squires, who were themselves now behind the men-at-arms. The four squires looked at him, and Luke nodded to him. Leon returned the nod, and they turned back to the action.

Roland hacked through the banshees with no problem; he was a sixth-tier mage, after all. The other three were having a bit more trouble, but the banshees still fell before their might. Their dark fingers scratched at Dame Sheira's ice armor and Sir Andrew's stone skin but didn't so much as leave a mark. Sir Roger swung his flaming mace around, catching one in a fiery explosion, causing the others to keep their distance from the crackling flame.

Roland was easily the best suited of the four of them to kill the banshees. They were beings of the dark, and he was a light mage, so his light beams would cut through them like a hot knife through butter. The banshees pulled back towards the trees a little, but the knights gave chase.

Suddenly, out of the darkness, came a light grey fog and another large group of banshees. The fog emanated a cold aura, and the ground froze beneath it. There was a vague shadow of a humanoid being within, and a pair of glowing blue eyes staring at the dumbfounded knights. This being raised its hand, and all the dozens of banshees began flying around the knights, constantly blocking their view and harassing them, but rarely getting close enough for the knights to strike. The squires and men-at-arms gradually began to lose track of the knights within the swirling mass of darkness, though a few brief flashes of light from Roland would occasionally pierce through.

Three banshees peeled off from that group and made a beeline for the men-at-arms. Adrianos was right in front, and he raised his sword high. The first banshee rushed straight towards him, and Adrianos brought his blade down upon it with all the force and magic he could muster. The banshee took the sword to the head and fell, dead before it hit the ground. The darkness that made up most of its body dissipated, leaving only the tiny desiccated corpse of a young child lying at Adrianos' feet.

He wasn't distracted, however, as the other two banshees tore past him. The other men-at-arms managed to stop them, one with a spear to the gut followed by a sword to the throat, and the other ran straight into a shield, bouncing off it and right back at Adrianos. The man-at-arms with the shield was thrown backward into the squires by the impact, so he couldn't take advantage of the banshee's

moment of weakness, but Adrianos wasn't so unfortunate. He swung his blade and parted the banshees' head from its neck.

The ice wraith watched the entire exchange. It calmly began to advance, passing the knights still trapped by the banshee horde, and towards Adrianos.

He could feel the cold, and his body began to stiffen. The hands gripping his sword began to shake, and he almost dropped it. But, Adrianos stood firm against the monster. The ice on the ground spread to Adrianos' feet, and fog slowly surrounded him. He raised his sword, channeling all of the magic within him into the blade, and brought it down upon the shadowy figure within, only for the ice wraith to catch his blade with its hand. Adrianos momentarily struggled, trying to free his weapon from the wraith's frozen fingers, but it wouldn't budge. He unsentimentally let it go, then drew a dagger at his belt. Before he could stab towards the ice wraith, however, the creature swung its fist into his chest like a hammer, throwing Adrianos almost twenty feet away, and most certainly breaking a few ribs.

The wraith turned toward the other men-at-arms, its aura emitting a boundless killing intent that hit them like an avalanche. One man's knees buckled, and he collapsed, unconscious. Another dropped his blade, and fell to his hands and knees, sobbing in fear. The others still stood, but certainly not firm. They shook in their boots, and none dared to move any closer. In fact, the wraith began slowly walking towards them, and they backed up.

Leon and the squires were all but paralyzed with fear. The wraith's aura was suffocating to them, and it took everything they had not to immediately pass out. Kevin and John fell to their knees, while Luke and Victoria barely stayed standing by leaning on each other. Leon was the best off of the lot, staying on his feet, but he swayed unsteadily like a drunk stumbling home and could barely lift his sword, let alone wield it with any kind of strength.

The wraith reached out for the closest man-at-arms, with its inhumanely thin arm leaving the icy cold fog that surrounded it and giving everyone a good look. Its arm seemed to be made of ice, with a few blue veins glowing gently beneath the surface. The freezing fingers closed around the man's throat and began to squeeze. No one could move to stop it, and the man-at-arms thought his life was over.

That is, until everyone heard the sound of thunder. The dark forest lit up from brilliant flashes of lightning, and the shrieks of banshees died away. A few sounds reminiscent of shattering glass followed, and a bolt of lightning blazed through the trees, tearing apart the banshees surrounding Roland and the three knights, and slammed into the ice wraith grasping the man-at-arms. The fog was blasted away, revealing a body made up entirely of light blue ice covered in dark blue veins, a face that lacked a nose, and a sword sticking out of its chest.

Of course, it was Artorias' sword. He hadn't wanted to use his magic within sight of the knights, as it might lead to them figuring out who he was, but the ice wraith was starting to threaten his son. All concerns about his identity vanished, and he summoned all the power his lightning could bring to bear. The ice wraiths surrounding him were annihilated, and he returned to the group as quickly as his exceptional magic would allow.

Now, with his sword in the final ice wraith, he used his magic one last time, sending prodigious amounts of lightning magic surging through its body. It didn't even have the time to scream, as the ice that made

up its body cracked and crumbled. All that was left of the wraith was a pile of ice shards at Artorias' feet.

With the defeat of the ice wraith, Leon, the squires, and the men-at-arms quickly regained control of themselves. Artorias immediately went to Leon, only relaxing when he found his son unharmed.

Unfortunately, with most of the banshees around Roland being taken care of by Artorias, the paladin saw Artorias' magic. Adrianos, picking himself up while clenching his teeth from the pain, also saw Artorias' skill with lightning magic. The same thought came to both.

'He's Artorias Raime!'

Chapter 27: The Glade

Roland quickly mopped up the last of the banshees, and the knights rejoined the party. Adrianos could still move, so he did the same.

No one hesitated now, they all knew that they couldn't stay outside for very long. Even now, they could see the same wraith fog in the forest coming towards them.

Sir Andrew picked up Connor's body, not bothering with the board, and unceremoniously threw it over his shoulder.

Leon took the lead, guiding everyone through the forest, while Artorias and Roland ran on either side of the group, keeping watch for any more monsters in the dark.

Fortunately, after fighting off the group of ice wraiths and a whole lot of banshees, their journey was nerve-wracking but largely uneventful. Artorias and Roland did occasionally see the cold eyes of watching ice wraiths from between distant trees, however, so they never let their guard down.

Finally, Leon led the group into the clearing filled with purple grass, and they saw the fort that was built in the middle of it. The group ran to the tunnel entrance, Leon opened the door, and they quickly filed in. Leon led the way, opening the inner door while Artorias closed the outer door.

When everyone was behind the walls of the fort, they were able to breathe a little easier. Artorias locked up the inner door, then went to the obelisk, checking to make sure that all the defensive wards were working properly.

Roland's party were physically and mentally exhausted, so they simply sat down on the ground and caught their breath.

Leon could think of little else but his own bed, but after checking the obelisk, Artorias grabbed him and pulled him towards the supply shack. They grabbed a few large sheets of cloth, and a few pieces of wood, and brought them outside.

"You all can use these for tents, as you don't look like you brought any," Artorias said.

"Thank you," replied Roland.

Roland's party immediately went about setting up the tents, with Leon's help. They were all eager to get to sleep, so they weren't wasting any time.

Artorias glanced at Sir Andrew, who was still holding Connor. “You can put him in here, for now. We can throw together a decent litter to carry him out of here, but for now, he’ll be ok in the ice shack.” He led the knight into the food storage shack, where the sleigh that Artorias and Leon had taken to Vale Town was sitting, still full of food. Artorias had felt a little awkward about having Torfinn store it, so he had brought it home himself a few days before the knights arrived in Vale Town.

Sir Andrew gently laid Connor down in the ice shack, then went back outside to continue helping out with the tents.

It didn’t take long for Roland’s party to finish getting set up, and the knights immediately crawled into their tent and passed out, with Leon and the squires not that far behind.

The men-at-arms also fell fast asleep, except for Adrianos, who only laid down and pretended to sleep. He was contemplating what he saw during the fight with the banshees, the lightning magic that Artorias used, his age, even Leon’s presence. He was absolutely certain that Artorias and Leon were the two people he needed to find!

Outside, he could hear Roland approaching Artorias, and asking to speak in private. Privacy wasn’t too difficult to find, given that everyone had gone to bed, but they still gave the tents some space and went behind Artorias’ hut. Adrianos slowly looked around at the sleeping men-at-arms around him, and, certain that they were all asleep, began to channel some of his magic. The light around him began to dim, quickly enveloping him in shadows. He sank down deep into the shadows and disappeared.

Outside, Roland and Artorias had gone to the small garden that Artorias had planted behind his hut. Roland glanced around at the colorful plants, admiring the strong and healthy look that each one had.

“You have a lovely garden.”

“Thank you.”

“Are these Arran flowers?” Roland gestured to a group of thorny flowers with short stems and five luminescent yellow petals each.

“Indeed, they are. You have a good eye, not many can distinguish Arran flowers from Yellow Kentars.”

“Well, I have an interest in alchemy, and Arran flowers can be used to make a good low-grade healing salve.”

Artorias smiled. He wasn’t skilled in alchemy, most of what he could do was done by muddling around after reading some of his families’ books that he’d brought north fifteen years ago.

“So, Sir Roland, what did you want to talk about?”

Roland went silent for a moment, trying to choose a good way to ask his question. But, he wasn’t the most eloquent person, so he decided to just be direct.

“You’re Artorias Raime, aren’t you? The second son of Archduke Kyros Raime.”

Artorias was shocked for a moment and even fought the urge to reach for his sword, which was still at his hip. Then, he sighed. He almost expected this, as he made the choice to tell the paladin his real name, and even showed off his magic when an ice wraith came close to attacking Leon.

He still didn't quite know how to deal with this, though. The impression he'd gotten from Roland was that he was a good, honorable man, a trustworthy man, but they hadn't been acquainted for long. Artorias felt that he couldn't just kill Roland, so all he could do was sigh.

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone." Roland could see the struggle on Artorias' face and after remembering the strength that he had shown during the fight—the strength that easily exceeded his own—he was quick to placate Artorias' fears.

"See that you don't."

Roland started feeling a little nervous now. Artorias was smiling at him, but the rest of him radiated hostility.

"If it's alright for me to ask, why are you all the way up here? If you returned to the Kingdom, you would be made the Lord of the Great Plateau, and Archduke of the Northern Territories."

"You're quite bold, aren't you? That's a sensitive topic."

"I'm sorry! I'm just curious as to what someone of your noble heritage is doing so far away from civilization, especially when King Julius thinks you're dead and is seeking a successor for the Lordship of the Great Plateau."

"My immediate family has been completely wiped out, knight. The only reason my son and I yet breathe is because we ran away to the Vales. If *anyone* threatens us, I will spare none of my power to make sure they are annihilated." With that said, Artorias gave Roland a look that could freeze a desert and allowed his killing intent to crash upon the knight.

Artorias had spent the last fifteen years stewing in his guilt and rage over the loss of his wife, then for the deaths of his father and brother. This left him with an extremely potent killing intent. Even Roland, a knight who had been fighting the enemies of the Kingdom and keeping the King's Peace for his entire adult life and had cultivated a strong killing intent of his own, couldn't face it head-on, and was briefly left with weak knees and shortness of breath before he circulated his magic to combat the pressure he was under.

"Y-You can consider... my lips sealed!" The pressure coming from Artorias was intense, and Roland could barely get the sentence out.

But, once he did, Artorias restrained his killing intent. Roland gasped for breath and took a moment to compose himself.

"Well, I suppose we can consider that conversation as having never happened..." Roland said as he finished straightening himself up.

Artorias smiled at him as if Roland had never said anything at all.

"That would be for the best, knight."

“Then, I’ll be heading for bed. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Roland quickly returned to the tents. It’s possible that if he had been paying attention, he might have noticed the shadow gliding across the ground, back to the tent with the men-at-arms. Once inside, the shadow dissolved away, allowing Adrianos to be seen again. The other five men-at-arms were still fast asleep, and Roland was still shaken from his brief conversation with Artorias, so Adrianos went completely unnoticed.

He’d overheard the conversation between Roland and Artorias, he’d heard Artorias confirm his own identity. Now, he couldn’t wait to return to the south. He needed to inform Lord Justin that he’d found the last scions of House Raime.

The following morning was rather awkward. Artorias and Leon barely spoke to anyone, except for Artorias telling them the time they’d leave. This behavior wasn’t out of the ordinary for Leon, but Artorias had been somewhat friendly to them, only to suddenly become colder now.

The group ate their breakfast in relative silence. Artorias didn’t seem to be doing it consciously, but he was radiating a slight killing aura. It wasn’t putting pressure on any of them, not even the second-tier squires, but it did cause everyone to be cagey and on edge.

Roland knew that he caused this shift in attitude, but he didn’t know how to make it right. He decided to give Artorias the day to calm down, then try to apologize and reiterate that he wouldn’t leak their location.

So, with a depressing start to the day, the group set off from the fort. There were no ice wraiths waiting for them when they exited the tunnel, no banshee screams were heard, the forest was peaceful. The animals gave the large group a wide berth. Wind Wolf packs ran away on sight, birds scattered, and all the creatures of the forest got out of their way. Consequently, they arrived at the Heartwood Glade by midday.

The enormous glade was surrounded by a wall of huge boulders easily twenty or twenty-five feet tall, so they had to enter through a small gap on the south side.

Roland’s party stopped and stared in awe as they finally got a good look at the majesty of the Heartwood trees. These were ancient things and stood incredibly tall, many over two hundred feet and most others easily over one hundred and fifty; the rest were comparatively tiny, only thirty or forty feet tall. The entire glade was filled with a peaceful aura, that soothed and calmed all who entered.

“This place is incredible!” Victoria gasped.

“Try to keep quiet, this is a sacred place.” Artorias quickly rebuked her.

Roland looked at Artorias quizzically, and Victoria shrank back in fear.

“Why would we need to be quiet? We are surrounded by nothing but trees.” Dame Sheira didn’t want to pick a fight with Artorias, as she knew she would lose, but she couldn’t just stand there and let her squire be admonished by a relative stranger.

“Have any of you heard the stories about the wars of the old gods?” Artorias looked around. Everyone looked back at him with blank stares, shook their head, or were too preoccupied admiring the trees.

“Well, I would look into the Epic of Antares or Tantalus’ Divine War trilogy when you return to the south. One of the details both legends go into are the gods’ burial rites. Those who die in the service of the gods would be buried in circles of ten, while the gods themselves would be buried in circles of seven. Their hearts would be removed beforehand, and replaced with a heartwood seed, which is where the tree got its name. Now, take a look at how the glade is arranged.”

The group examined the trees more closely and saw that most of the trees closer to the boulder wall were arranged in circles of ten trees apiece, with only the smaller and youngest trees being the exceptions, while the trees closer to the center were arranged in circles of seven.

“This place...” Roland began, but when he stopped, Artorias finished for him.

“...is a graveyard and the taller trees are the graves.” Artorias looked at each of Roland’s party in turn, making sure to have eye contact with each. “There is a clearing in the very center of the glade. That is where we will make camp. Go ahead and search for your amber, but take as little as possible, disturb as little as possible, and everything will be alright.”

Even the cynical Sir Andrew wasn’t going to contradict Artorias here. Everything, from the heartwood trees themselves to the gentle breeze, to the peaceful aura, made them believe that this was indeed a sacred place and that they should be quiet and respectful while they were here.

“Very well then. Sir Roger, you take the squires and go with Artorias to set up camp. Everyone else spread out and look for that Heartwood Amber.”

Chapter 28: Return Journey

Roland, the knights, and the men-at-arms all split off from the group and began wandering around the glade, taking care to disturb the place as little as possible, while looking for any signs of the amber they were there for.

Artorias, Leon, Sir Roger, and the squires all made for the clearing in the center of the glade, to begin setting up tents so they could stay the night.

Those looking for the amber, despite only speaking in whispers, and restraining their auras as best as they could, were still far more comfortable than those setting up camp. Artorias was still in a bad mood, and the squires could feel it. Sir Andrew was able to shake off the slight discomfort that Artorias’ aura brought, but the squires didn’t have that kind of power.

They began setting up the tents in silence.

Artorias and Leon preferred to sleep under the sky, so they had little work to do. Artorias lay down and closed his eyes, while Leon, feeling somewhat restless, decided to go over to Victoria and Luke.

“... Need any help?” Leon asked, with some hesitation and uncertainty.

The two squires froze in shock. Victoria, the more outgoing one, recovered fast.

“We’d love your help.” She smiled at Leon, and he joined them in their work.

After that short exchange, the only sounds were of wooden poles being pounded into the dirt, and the shuffling of cloth as the tents were completed.

By the time they were finished, Artorias had fallen asleep, and the killing aura he radiated faded.

Leon went and took a seat next to his father, while Sir Roger and the squires sat down in the center of the small camp. With everyone feeling more relaxed without the constant killing intent, the squires began talking amongst themselves while Sir Roger sat and stared off into the glade.

“What kind of shit is that? Not a chance that Flavius would beat Theodoro in a fair match! My boy Theo’s got some thick drake scale armor, and stonesskin earth magic that can stop attacks from sixth-tier mages! Flavius wouldn’t even penetrate Theodoro’s defenses and would eat shit with a single hit from Theo’s maul.” Kevin said passionately.

From the sounds of it, Leon guessed that the squires were talking about famous arena fighters. He had little to contribute to the conversation, though, knowing only a few stories that Artorias had told him of the enormous arena in the capital city, a stadium that can seat over a hundred thousand people. It was the only venue in the entire kingdom that could rival Konstantine’s Dome in Teira in size and spectacle.

“Flavius may have only ascended to the fifth-tier recently, but he’s got stamina. His wind magic has a very low mana cost, so he can dance circles around the heavier Theodoro. He just has to make the big guy tired, stonesskin takes a lot of mana to maintain.” Luke responded.

“Did you see Flavius’ last fight? He almost got turned inside out! And he was using that very strategy, but it didn’t work!” John added.

“Yes, but he wasn’t fighting a defensive opponent, he was fighting Nikephoros, a water mage. Water mages have weak defense, so they tend to focus on offense, so of course Flavius couldn’t take his time and wear Nike down. But Theodoro isn’t that fast, he won’t be able to touch Flavius, and once he loses that stonesskin, Flavius will end things with a single swing of his blade!”

“What about you, Victoria? Do you like light and speedy...” Kevin nodded at Luke. “...Or do you like tough and strong?” He crossed his huge and muscular arms, subtly flexing to appear even bigger.

“Hm...” Victoria sat and thought for a moment before a dreamy look appeared in her eyes. “I actually like that Antonius guy.”

The other three squires sighed in dejection.

“Of course you do...” said Kevin

“No surprise there.” Luke nodded in understanding.

“Big shocker, that one.” John’s voice was dripping with sarcasm.

“What’s wrong with that? He’s won more than thirty matches in a row!” Victoria responded indignantly.

“Yeah, that’s because he’s too damned pretty for the arena,” Kevin said bitterly.

“It should be a rule that nobles can’t participate,” John said, with a tone that could turn wine into vinegar.

Victoria looked at the two of them quizzically. “What do you mean?”

"His manager and many other arena operators noticed how many ladies turn out to see him, so they generally just have him fight against opponents far inferior to him. Even though most of his matches are set against fourth-tier mages, just like him, they are typically far less experienced." Luke replied.

"Let me ask you something, Victoria. How many of his opponents can you name?" Kevin asked.

"Well... there was... Right! There was Themistocles!"

"Good, but that was like, twenty matches ago. Themistocles has come into his own since then, but he had no noteworthy fights before then. Can you name any others?"

Victoria thought for a while, before finally answering no.

"Exactly. He fights nobodies. Themistocles became someone afterward, but he's an exception. No one wants to take a risk that Antonius will actually lose, he makes everyone involved too much money."

"He's a showman, not a fighter. He fights for the money, not for the sport," John said.

Luke's face distorted in disgust. "Indeed. He's always talking publicly about the Seventh Echelon gear he has and wears their armor in the arena."

"And what's wrong with *that*? Seventh Echelon has some good gear." Victoria was starting to get worked up now, as her favorite athlete was Antonius, and he was getting dumped on now.

"Seventh Echelon has some good enchanted gear, but if you want some good shit, then you'd be better served asking a Heaven's Eye merchant or to go to the Blasted Furnace." Luke smiled at everyone, then reaching into his leather chest armor, and pulled out a small dagger. "In fact, I got this at the Furnace. It's got an enchantment that can keep it sharp enough to shave with from now till the plane crumbles into the Chaos. I could pierce armor fit for a third-tier mage with this."

Leon had been listening to their conversation this entire time, as he was extremely curious about the kingdom, but when the talk of enchanting started, his ears really perked up. While the other squires were admiring the shine of the blade, and the workmanship of the griffon bone hilt, Luke noticed that Leon had sat up, and was looking over at them.

"Hey there, why don't you come and join us?" Luke waved to Leon and patted the ground next to him. Kevin and John smiled at him, while Victoria looked a bit conflicted for a moment, remembering their first encounter, but then thoughts of Leon helping during the fight with the bandits brought her beautiful smile back out.

Despite some hesitation, Leon decided to accept their invitation. He sat down next to Luke, and the squire passed him the dagger to check out.

"Interested in enchanting, are you?" Kevin asked.

"A bit." Leon tacitly responded. Leon finished examining the dagger, paying close attention to the runic glyph carved into the handle, and passed it back to Luke, who put it back in its sheath. "Thank you."

"Yeah, no problem. In fact, I should be the one thanking you, after all, you did help us hold out during that battle the other day." Leon nodded to Luke in acknowledgment, but his face remained completely passive and expressionless.

"You're a damn good fighter. Did your father teach you?" Victoria asked, leaning over and smiling at Leon.

"Yes." It seemed that that was all he intended to say, so after an awkward pause, Victoria continued.

"Well, it's a very effective style."

"Hey, I have a question. Do you know what's up with this vale? Ever since we got here, I've felt drained and weak, like I'm carrying two hundred pounds of armor." John asked.

Leon looked curiously at him. "I haven't ever noticed anything. This place feels just like the Brown Bear's vale, just like it always has."

"Huh... That's weird."

"Hey, um 'Little Lion', was it? Do you have another, easier name we could call you?" Luke asked.

"My name is Leon. Everyone just calls me little lion."

"Ah, that makes sense. Leon, you, um, you helped Victoria and myself back in the city too..."

"Yes, I remember. Some of those thugs had messed with me before, and I broke some of their bones. That's why they ran off."

"Ok, but I was wondering if we had somehow offended you because you hit us with your killing intent when we tried to thank you. If we someh--"

"I did?!" Leon looked shocked, and he glanced over at Victoria. She nodded, slightly confused by his reaction. Leon's face grew red from embarrassment, and he looked down in shame.

"I'm terribly sorry, I'm still learning how to control my aura. That was unintentional," he said quickly, with some panic in his voice.

Luke looked quite taken aback at that, as control over their aura is typically the first thing taught to a first-tier mage.

"Uh... It's fine, don't worry about it." He smiled at Leon, who was growing more embarrassed by the second, especially with the other squires looking at him. Victoria even giggled at him, finding his actions kind of cute.

While everyone at the camp relaxed, the others were out scouring the glade, looking for any signs of Heartwood Amber.

"Ugh, by the ancestors, this place sucks. Ever since we entered the vale, I've been feeling awful." One of the men-at-arms complained.

"Yeah, there's something about it that almost feels like it's weighing me down. The sooner we leave, the better." Another responded.

"Well then, maybe you should be looking rather than chatting!" Sir Andrew reprimanded. The two men-at-arms immediately returned to their objective, and Sir Andrew turned to Roland.

"They're not wrong, sir. This vale really does suck. And that Artorias isn't making things any better. He seemed alright when we met up at that temple, but now he's in a terrible mood."

Roland sighed. "I think that's my fault. I spoke with him a little last night, and it seems I've put him on edge."

'Maybe it's a mistake, given how he reacted last time, but I'll reassure him that I won't tell anyone about him when returning south...' Roland thought to himself.

Roland, Sir Andrew, and two men-at-arms had decided to go west after entering the glade, while Dame Sheira took the other four men-at-arms and went east. They were all scanning the trees, looking for anything that might be the amber they need. And Roland was in luck.

These were very old trees, and they had a long time to accumulate resin in small pockets and hollows. After about three hours, Roland finally spotted a large chunk of amber about thirty feet up the trunk of a tree. He'd hoped it would take less time, as his magic senses had been spread out over a large portion of the glade but finding something small and inanimate was incredibly difficult with magical senses, not to mention the magic that surrounded these trees were obscuring any amber he might otherwise detect. So, it wasn't until he actually began looking with his eyes that he spotted what he'd come for.

Roland began making his way towards the tree with the amber, but he suddenly froze. He'd seen something walking around the base. As the group drew closer, they realized it was a small pack of wind wolves.

Wind wolves are a dark grey wolf, with few distinguishing physical characteristics about them other than their brilliant green eyes, and that their fluffy fur was almost always moving like the wind was blowing through it, even when there was no wind.

The wolf pack froze as the group approached. Roland's hand went to his sword by reflex, but he caught himself before drawing it. He could feel a subtle pressure being exerted by the trees, and their aura of peace was omnipresent throughout the glade, so he slowly let go of the sword, and stared back at the wolves. After a brief staring contest, the wolves walked away, vanishing into the glade.

The group breathed a sigh of relief, and Roland quickly jumped up the trunk of the tree towards the amber. It was lodged in a small crevasse where two small branches sprang out from the trunk, but it didn't take much jostling for Roland to get a hold of it and pull most of the amber out. He swiftly jumped back to the ground with a chunk of gently glowing golden amber the size of his head in hand.

He smiled at the rest of the group, and they began making their way to the camp. They now had their amber, and it was time to go home, a prospect they were all eager for. They could almost feel the hot food, baths, and proper beds they had back in the capital, and were it not for the calm and quiet aura emanating from the glade, they would've jumped and whooped for joy.

After ten more minutes, they arrived at the camp. Roland sent one of the men-at-arms to grab Dame Sheira's group, and the others all relaxed. The squires were ecstatic at the prospect of going back home, and in their exultation, no one noticed Leon slipping away to somewhere quieter and less filled with people.

Dame Sheira's group arrived not too long after, and Roland showed off the amber. Everyone finally relaxed, knowing that the mission was almost over, and was as good as done so long as they were careful on the way out of this vale.

So, the rest of the day was spent with everyone mostly sitting around the camp, polishing up their weapons and eating some food. The knights and their squires did some training, but it wasn't very strenuous, and when they woke the next morning, the squires weren't even sore.

Artorias, throughout all this, continued to sleep. He hadn't gotten much sleep after Roland revealed that he knew who he was, and now he was catching up. Even when everyone was admiring the heartwood trees' golden glow during the night, Artorias slumbered on.

He was awake by morning, though. He wasn't emitting his killing intent like he was the previous day, but he wasn't any more talkative. Roland excitedly informed him that they were good to go, and Artorias simply nodded and led them out of the glade.

It was an uneventful journey back to Leon and Artorias' fort, and the two all but locked themselves up in their houses while Roland's group rested outside. Their jubilant mood was only dampened when Sir Andrew threw together a wooden litter for Connor and carved a small air rune on the bottom, just big enough to get it off the ground by a foot or so and make it easier to carry Connor back home.

The next morning, they left early, leaving the tents they borrowed from Artorias behind, intending to reach the mountain pass as quickly as possible. With the memory of what happened when they dallied for too long still fresh in their minds, as well as seeing Sir Andrew pull the floating litter behind them, they didn't screw around. They didn't slow down to admire the colorful forest, and they didn't stop to stare down into the Divine Scar, either. They just continued west, towards the mountain pass.

The sun was going down when they arrived, so Artorias and Leon decided to stay the night with Roland's group in the pass.

Roland took the opportunity to reaffirm his commitment to keeping Artorias' location under wraps, but when he brought up the topic, Artorias fixed him in a steely gaze that made Roland retreat back towards his bedroll again.

When the morning came, the squires approached Leon.

"Thank you again, Leon, for all that you've done for us on this mission," Luke said warmly, clasping Leon's shoulder. Leon wasn't a fan of that, and jerked his shoulder away, prompting Luke to apologize.

"Well, then, I hope we meet again, Leon. Stay safe out there!" Victoria gave a beaming smile to Leon, and the young man smiled in embarrassment.

"... Yeah... You too..." He was barely able to speak and gave a shy wave to the squires. And with that, he and Artorias turned and vanished back into the forest. Artorias didn't bother saying goodbye to anyone.

Roland nodded to his people, gave a somber look at Connor, also remembering the other two men-at-arms in Vale Town, and led his group west through the mountain pass.

Chapter 29: A Call

The trek through the pass went faster than it did when Artorias had led them, as everyone was quite eager to get home. They were through in several hours, and on their way back to Vale Town.

They arrived back in the small city after an uneventful trek by sundown and made for the storehouse they'd been staying at. The party got settled in, while Roland went to the longhouse to speak with Torfinn.

The chief was busy mediating an argument between a pair of merchants when Roland arrived. He'd gotten word of the knight's return to the city beforehand and had expected Roland to come.

As the paladin walked in, Torfinn smiled, and silenced the bickering merchants with a wave of his hand, followed by a stern look when one raised his voice to complain. "Ah! Sir Roland! Welcome back! I assume this means you've found what you were looking for?"

"Yes, I have, and I must thank you for the assistance of both you and your tribe."

"Nonsense! This is what friends do for each other, no?"

"Indeed. Well, I also came to thank you for your hospitality, and to inform you that my party and I will be leaving tomorrow morning, and I'm hoping you can assist us with gathering a few day's worth of supplies. We can pay in silver, of course."

"Sure thing, no problem! Just don't forget..."

"The diplomats? I remember. You have my word as a paladin of the Bull Kingdom, I'll have a diplomatic party sent north as soon as I arrive back in the capital, you can expect it within the year."

Torfinn smiled joyously. "Good! Hopefully, our alliance will last longer this time!"

Roland returned Torfinn's bright smile, and said, "I hope so, as well."

So, Roland returned to the storehouse, and Torfinn had a few warriors escort the squires around the marketplace, augmenting their severely depleted supplies for the journey back through the southern mountain pass.

None of the party was looking forward to journeying through that pass, however much they wanted to go home. They had little choice, though, as it was the only known path that would take them where they wanted to go. The smuggler's path was already blocked, and even if it wasn't, Marquis Grandison wouldn't simply let them walk through his territory after killing his men. There had been maps of the Frozen Mountains that showed other routes through, but they had all been lost when House Raime's palace in Teira was destroyed.

There were a few distant cadet branches of House Raime still kicking around the Plateau, but none could access the private archives deep beneath the palace ruins in Teira, and all the other houses of the Great Plateau were relatively young, three hundred years old or younger, and didn't have reliable maps of the Frozen Mountain Range.

Thus, the passage protected by Clear Ice Fortress was their only option.

The next morning, the party set off with their fallen comrades in tow. Half of the day was spent just returning to the Frozen Mountains and the pass itself. There were a few small villages in the area, but Roland decided to make camp at the foot of the mountains, just outside the pass.

They all got as much rest as they could that night and began the arduous journey through the pass the next morning.

They navigated sheer cliffs, rocky paths, and frozen forests, resting in freezing caves. It was a hard and deeply uncomfortable trek, but they were all strong and healthy mages, so after three and half days, they emerged on the south side of the mountains, exhausted but otherwise fine.

The knights on the walls of Clear Ice Fortress recognized them, and opened the gate, allowing them back into the Kingdom. They only stayed at the fortress for a single day, as they were quite eager to return to civilization. They had spent almost three weeks in the vales and were beyond happy to be back on their horses and moving south.

The first big city on the road home was Teira, near the center of the Great Plateau. There were a few towns and villages along the road, but they just rode right on past and arrived in Teira only two days after leaving Clear Ice.

Roland was proud of what everyone had done and arranged for the best rooms he could find on such short notice. The bright lights and city noise of Teira was barely on everyone's mind as they made directly for the beds and passed out. Roland, Sir Andrew, and Sir Roger were the only three who didn't, as they brought the bodies of the fallen men-at-arms to the local royal garrison and arranged for them to be sent to their families. Once that was done, they went back to the inn and joined the others in sleep.

The following afternoon, Roland called everyone into his room. He was staying in one of the nicest rooms in the hotel, which was saying something as the hotel was one of the nicest in the city. It had marble floors, walls covered in painted murals, and a courtyard with a garden that was open to the sun.

Once everyone was gathered in his entrance hall, Roland spoke. "Alright, I'm going to give everyone three days of rest here in the city. Go out, have some fun, and relax. Just be back here by noon on Tuesday, got it?"

Everyone's faces broke into smiles, and they had to contain their excitement. Fortunately, they didn't have to contain it that long, as once everyone nodded in acknowledgment of Roland's order, he dismissed them all.

Victoria sped off to find a tailor for the silkgrass she had brought back, and all but dragged Luke along with her.

Kevin, John, and two of the men-at-arms made for the biggest merchant forum in Teira.

Roland, Dame Sheira, and Sir Roger decided to wander this ancient city, visiting the major attractions like the Lightning Fields, Konstantine's Dome, and the immense library on a hill near the southern edge of the city.

"Hey, Adrianos, want to come with us?" Sir Andrew called out.

The man-at-arms glanced at Sir Andrew and the three other men-at-arms with him. They all had rather lascivious looks about them, so he could guess where they intended to go.

“Let me guess, you’re all off to the red-light district.”

Sir Andrew and the men-at-arms grinned at him. “Of course, we are. We’re going to toast to our fallen brothers and find some girls to warm our beds. You should come with, you’ve earned some female attention.”

Adrianos smiled apologetically. “Nah. I’m going to the Exarch’s office.”

Sir Andrew raised an eyebrow in confusion. “Do you have some business with the royal governor?”

“No, but I need to use their comm stones. My, uh, my sister was always frail, and she came down with a nasty illness before we left. I’m sure she’s fine, but I’m still worried, so I’d like to call home and touch base.”

“Alright, I understand. Family’s important, you should take care of yours. Anyway, I’ve heard some enticing things about the Red Lamp, so if you do decide to join us, that’s where we’ll be.” Sir Andrew clasped Adrianos’ shoulder, and he and his group left.

Adrianos smiled at them and began making his way to an imposing building in the center of the southern district. This place was the Exarch’s Office and was the only building for about five hundred feet, as all the others around it had been demolished. It wasn’t very fancy, in contrast to the opulent palaces in the same district, just a large rectangular building about five stories high, the very picture of a dry, boring, bureaucratic building.

The Exarch of Teira himself was just someone sent to keep the peace in the city after Archduke Kyros Raime had been assassinated, but he wasn’t a polarizing man. He did his job well, and no one hated him. He wasn’t particularly beloved, either, but so long as the people weren’t taking advantage of the fall of House Raime to rebel against the Bull King, then all was well.

Adrianos walked up to the large door and pushed it open. The interior of the building was far more decorated than the outside, with marble floors streaked with spiraling black patterns, thick red carpets, and walls adorned with paintings. Adrianos didn’t even glance at any of the decorations as he walked through the large atrium, and approached the large granite desk, behind which sat a dozen receptionists.

He asked the nearest available receptionist for directions to the comm stone room and walked as swiftly as he could there. His hands were starting to shake with excitement, and his heart beat far faster than it should at the speed he was walking. This was to be a very important call and could possibly mean going back to the home he hadn’t seen in over a decade, so it was natural that he was getting nervous.

When Adrianos arrived at the communications room, he approached the manager’s desk.

“Here for a call?” the manager asked disinterestedly.

“Yeah.”

“Papers.”

Adrianos gave him his I.D. papers, and the manager closely scrutinized them, freezing for a moment when he noticed that Adrianos was of House Isynos, but he recovered quickly. When he was satisfied, he gave them back, and asked, "Where and who do you want to call?"

"Lord Justin Isynos, Exarch of Calabria."

"Very well. Follow me, please." He led Adrianos down a nearby hall, and into one of several rooms branching off from it. The room was very dark, with heavy black curtains lining the room, and only a single magic lantern in the center of the ceiling. The curtains had been enchanted to dampen noise, so unless Adrianos was shouting bloody murder, no one outside the room would be able to hear what was said inside.

"Wait here, please." The manager gestured to a comfortable looking armchair, which, apart from a low table in front of it, was the only piece of furniture in the room.

The manager left the room, and Adrianos sat down in the chair. About ten minutes passed before the manager returned, with a bright blue stone in one hand and a stand to set it on in the other. He first placed the stand, then the stone upon it, and began activating a series of magic glyphs on the stand.

The stand was a large black box, about the size of a suitcase, and was covered with barely visible runic symbols, forming an incredibly complex web of interconnected magic glyphs. These glyphs controlled where the accompanying stone would seek a connection, and it required an extremely intricate knowledge of these particular enchantments to connect to the right stone in the right place.

After a few more moments of poking the stand, the fist-sized stone began glowing brighter, and it began to gently hover about two feet off the stand. The manager finished up, then glanced over at Adrianos.

"When you're done, simply activate this magic circle." He pointed to a small orange circle the size of a fingernail on the front of the stand. "If there are any problems, feel free to come get me." And with that, he left the room, giving Adrianos some privacy.

The stone pulsed several times over the next few seconds before a gruff voice was heard coming from it.

"Calabrian Exarch's Office, how may I help you?"

"This is Adrianos Isynos, I need to speak with Lord Justin." Given the way these stones worked, the man on the other end knew exactly where the call was coming from, and thus didn't need Adrianos to confirm his identity.

"Lord Justin isn't in the building, currently. Is this urgent?"

"Yes, very."

"Ok, you can either leave a message or wait for us to inform Lord Justin of your call."

"I'll wait."

"Very well."

Calabria was over a thousand miles to the south of Teira, located on a large river that flowed from the western ranges of the Frozen Mountains, then running south through the capital and splitting off to

several merchant cities on the coast of the southern gulf. Trade goods would flow from these cities upriver, passing through Calabria where the river split and entering the lake in the middle of the capital. This flow of goods through the city had made Calabria rich, and there had been a lot of outrage among the nobility when King Julius had assigned a noble that no one had ever heard of before to administer it.

Compared to the much larger cities of Teira and the capital, Calabria looked quite small, but it still had a respectable population of about one hundred thousand. The largest building by far was the summer home of an exorbitantly wealthy merchant who lived in the capital, but the residence of the Exarch far outstripped it in terms of luxury and elegance. It looked quite similar to the royal palace, with intricately carved and painted murals on the white stone walls, decorative marble columns and blind arcades, and red roof tiles. The entire palace had been built around a central courtyard large enough to have both an expansive garden and a stone platform big enough to train upon in the martial and magical arts.

Currently, this platform was occupied by a grizzled older man, a sixth-tier mage with short brown hair and enormous muscles, and a young woman about sixteen years old, a third-tier mage, with long silver hair loosely tied in a ponytail, a fit, attractive figure, and stunning blue eyes. They were sparring with sword and shield, with the older man providing instruction.

Above them, from a balcony on the third floor, another man was proudly watching his daughter train with the master-at-arms. He, too, had silver hair that almost sparkled in the sunlight, and eyes like a crystal clear blue lake. He carried himself with an air of authority, and despite his thin and unimpressive frame, an aura of strength and vitality emanated from him.

This man was Lord Justin Isynos.

"Yes! Your aggressiveness is very good! But you still leave yourself open!" The master-at-arms deflected the young woman's strike and kicked out, sweeping her feet out from under her. She fell to the ground for perhaps the fiftieth time that day.

"You're focusing too much on your upper body, leaving your legs and feet open. If you lose your footing in a real fight, your head will soon follow. Again!"

The young woman leaped back to her feet, and with a great roar, threw herself again at the master-at-arms. Her assault was swift and unpredictable, every strike would be a killing blow had her opponent been mortal, but none penetrated the master-at-arms' iron-clad defense. Everywhere she struck, his shield would appear, and he easily deflected her attack again and bashed her with his shield, knocking her back to the ground.

"Keep yourself lower to the ground. A low center of gravity will help resist shield bashes and body slams." He demonstrated by spreading his feet slightly farther apart and keeping his knees bent.

As Lord Justin watched, the door to the sitting room behind him opened, and Timotheos, one of the mages sworn to House Isynos walked in. Timotheos bowed, then whispered a few words in Lord Justin's ear, "We've received a call from Adrianos. He says it's urgent."

Lord Justin nodded, then turned back to the two training beneath him.

“Valeria! That’s enough. The rest of the day is yours.” He smiled down at his daughter, who looked a bit aggrieved, but gave her father a slight bow and hopped down from the sparring platform, closely followed by the master-at-arms who was still talking about how she could improve.

Lord Justin turned back to Timotheos. “Well, let’s go see what Adrianos finds so urgent.”

The two swiftly walked out of the palace, crossed an enormous garden, and arrived at the back entrance of the Exarch’s Office. A few moments later, they had entered a room very similar to the one Adrianos was in, except Lord Justin’s was larger and far more richly decorated. The curtains were gilded with gold, and the chair even resembled a throne.

But, Lord Justin didn’t care about the decorations, and immediately sat down while looking to the hovering orb before him.

“Adrianos! How have you been?”

“Very well, my lord. In fact, I have discovered some information of monumental importance.”

“Ah, that’s what I like about you, always getting straight to the point. So, what have you found?”

“The hiding place of Artorias Raime and his son.”

That stunned Lord Justin. His eyes widened in shock and his relaxed and easygoing expression froze upon his face. He recovered just as quickly, however, and asked, “You’re sure? If you’re right, then we might be able to go home very soon, so if you’re mistaken...”

“A tall dark-haired man from a family known for its lightning magic. He stated his name was ‘Artorias’, and he has a son about sixteen or seventeen. Sir Roland, the paladin I was accompanying, came to the same conclusion I did and privately asked the man if he was Artorias Raime, and the man himself confirmed it!”

Lord Justin tried to maintain his calm look, but it started to slip, as inside he was a maelstrom of excitement. He glanced back at Timotheos, then back at the stone.

“I’m sending Timotheos and a few others on my fastest horses. They’ll be in Teira by tomorrow, and you’ll lead them to Artorias and his son. Get this done, and we can all leave this trash pile of a kingdom.” He gestured to Timotheos to come forward and speak with Adrianos, hammering out the details of where to meet.

As the two were leaving the Exarch’s Office to return to the palace, Lord Justin said, “Go grab three others of your choice and take my Saternan horses. Oh, and best take a vial of Souleater Venom as well, just to be sure.” Souleater Venom was extremely rare, but Lord Justin had been given three vials when he was sent to the Bull Kingdom.

“Yes, my lord.” Timotheos ran off to gather his team, and Lord Justin calmed his exuberant heart, regaining his calm and serene attitude.

Chapter 30: An Attack

Timotheos grabbed his three best men and barely gave them time enough to pack a few days of food and a change of clothes before dragging them to the stables. Lord Justin had sent word to get his four

best horses ready, and when Timotheos and his team arrived the stablemen had just finished getting them saddled and ready.

The Saternan horses were lean and muscular, not as large as a courser, but they could run at speeds of over one hundred miles per hour and sustain that pace for several days.

The four men jumped on the horses and sped off, almost knocking over the stablemen who hadn't gotten out of the way in time. They were in quite the rush and pushed the horses hard. Teira was a long way away, and they intended to get there by the next morning. So, they rapidly rode west, towards the setting sun, until they were out of the city, then turned north.

It was a long night, but the horses lived up to their reputation. The group had made it to an enormous land bridge that led up to the Great Plateau by sunrise and was in Teira just in time for a late breakfast. But none of them had any intention of stopping for food despite their fatigue, as their destination was the only thing on their mind.

When the Isynians arrived in the Bull Kingdom fifteen years ago, they immediately began to create a spy network. It wasn't to spy on the kingdom, but rather to look for Artorias and Leon. One such spy operated as a baker, and it was his house that Timotheos' group rode to.

After arriving in Teira, their pace slowed considerably as the baker's house was far away from the white stone and marble of the richer districts, and as such, the roads were smaller and more cramped. Fortunately for them, most of the people had left their houses to go to work, so despite the slower pace, the four men rode through the streets largely unhindered.

The baker's place was a small one-story house with dirty timber walls and a wooden roof. It had a path leading to a private backyard with a tall wooden fence, and that's where the group dismounted their horses. The baker immediately opened his back door and came out to greet them, but Timotheos wasn't interested in his greetings. He only held out a pouch of coins. The baker grabbed the heavy pouch, but Timotheos didn't let go. Instead, he pulled the baker in close, and said, "This money is so you can buy some good feed for the horses. Some people in my lord's employ will arrive in a day or two to pick them up, and if they haven't eaten..." He left the threat unstated, but the mortal baker was able to pick up on the implication. His face paled, and he nodded furiously.

"Good. Now, my where is my associate?"

"Indoors, good sir."

Timotheos pushed past the baker and walked into the house. It was dark, filthy, and filled with the stench of mold. Timotheos' face scrunched up in disgust.

"My Lord pays you too much for this place to be so abhorrent. Get this house cleaned up!" The baker nodded so fast that he had cracking sounds come from his neck.

Adrianos heard Timotheos' voice and poked his head out from around a corner.

"Cousin! It's been too long!" Timotheos pulled Adrianos into an affectionate headlock, then dragged him out of the house.

"Argh! Where are we going?! Shouldn't we talk inside?" Adrianos sputtered.

“We’re going north. We can talk on the way.” Timotheos released Adrianos, and the five men walked past the horses and back around to the front of the house.

“What about the horses? Wouldn’t it be faster to take them north?” Adrianos asked curiously.

“Lord Justin only lent them to us to get us to Teira as quickly as possible. They’re very expensive, even for him, and he isn’t willing to risk them getting hurt or stolen, so we’re leaving them here. He sent a collection team after us, and they’ll take those horses back to Calabria.”

“What about us? How will we return back south?”

Timotheos looked at Adrianos mockingly, and said, “Oh? Is the knight’s little errand boy worried about getting a few blisters from walking a bit?”

“No, I just want to get this done fast.”

“Well, we’re going on our own power from here. How far away is our objective?”

“About two hundred miles north, then another seventy or eighty miles east.”

“Ok, we can do that before nightfall,” Timotheos said confidently. He knew how rough the Frozen Mountains are, but his group wasn’t weighed down by weaker mages, so he didn’t think much of it. Clear Ice Fortress wasn’t a concern, either, as the group was confident that they could sneak past it with no one the wiser.

The group walked down the empty street, and the light around them began to twist and bend, while their shadows grew darker and thicker. Their bodies began to emit a smoky darkness, and they sank down into their shadows. The baker had made sure the horses were securely tied to his fence and came around the house to see off the group, but all he saw were a few lingering wisps of darkness.

Five shadows sped across the streets, sticking to the shadows of buildings and crowds when possible. No one saw any more than the baker, and soon enough, they had left Teira completely undetected. Once out of the city, they went north, keeping the road in sight while staying about a hundred feet away from it, well into the dirt, bushes, and trees where no one would notice these moving shadows.

In a couple hours, they spotted Clear Ice Fortress. The commander of the fortress was a sixth-tier mage, and his immediate subordinates were fifth-tier mages, but none were attentive enough to spot Timotheos’ group. The shadows shot over the ground, past the fortress, up and over the ice wall, and vanished into the Frozen Mountains. None of the soldiers at Clear Ice saw a thing.

The cold still affected them as shadows, and the rough terrain slowed them down a bit, but they lost little time. In fact, even though they had grown tired passing through the mountains, they still emerged on the other side before the sun had set.

Despite their mounting fatigue from the all-night ride and crossing the mountains, Timotheos pushed them onwards with Adrianos at his side guiding him. They had no intention of going to Vale Town, going directly east instead, towards the passage to the Forest of Black and White.

Adrianos whispered to Timotheos, “We should rest when we get to the pass.”

“Why?” asked Timotheos.

“It... wouldn’t be wise to enter that vale after dark. It’s infested with ice wraiths and banshees. We’re ill-suited to fighting them.”

Timotheos thought for a moment, then nodded in agreement. “Ok, we’ll get a good night’s sleep in the pass.” That’s exactly what they did. Artorias and Leon weren’t anywhere near the pass, and no tribesmen ever went anywhere close to the Forest of Black and White, so they rested without interruption.

They were up bright and early and set off as soon as they wolfed down some breakfast. They returned to their shadow forms and sped through the pass, emerging into the Forest of Black and White not long after.

“Ugh, what the hell is that aura?! This place feels awful!” one of the men said.

“I don’t know, but it seems to get stronger the farther east we go...” replied Adrianos.

“It doesn’t matter. We have a job to do, and we’ll get it done, no matter what,” said Timotheos, pushing the group onwards.

The sun was still rising, but the vale had grown bright enough that the banshees, ice wraiths, and other, less common night-time creatures had returned to their lairs, so the group proceeded without incident. The only time they stopped was at the Divine Scar, as even these men were struck with awe at its sight and the residual aura of the titanic attack that made it. But they didn’t stop long, just enough to get a good look, then off they were again.

It wasn’t even noon when they arrived at the purple grass clearing, and laid eyes on the fort. They were still very careful, however, and didn’t dispel their shadow forms.

“This is the place?” asked Timotheos.

“It is. Not that there’s too much room for confusion, as there doesn’t appear to be any other man-made structure in the entire vale.” Adrianos responded.

Timotheos very carefully spread his magic sense out over the fort but wasn’t able to see anything. He could see many of the wards and enchantments carved into the walls blocking his sight, though.

“Well, it seems that wall is very heavily warded. If possible, I’d like to do this as quietly as possible, and there isn’t a good way over that wall without alerting the people inside. How do they get in?”

“A tunnel that goes under the wall, with a pair of doors.” Adrianos pointed it out to Timotheos.

“Ok. We’ll wait here, in the shadows of the forest, for the night to fall. We’ll get fully rested, then we’ll infiltrate through that tunnel. I doubt the wards on the doors will be too difficult for us to undo.”

Timotheos was disciplined and cautious, despite his pride and sense of superiority. Even if he were tasked with killing a common mortal, he’d wait until night when they were fast asleep to strike. For one, his shadow magic would be far more potent and useful in the dark to accommodate its lack of defensive strength, and for another, he never ruled out the possibility that he would make a mistake or that his enemy would have some means of defeating him that he didn’t know about.

So, there they waited. The sun slowly crawled up the sky, then begin to fall after reaching its zenith. The vale was bright and warm during the day, but as the sun fell, it grew darker and colder.

During the evening, the group heard the sounds of footsteps and the rustling of leaves. They turned to the source of the sounds and saw Artorias and Leon carrying a pair of dead wind wolves back to the fort.

"That's them," muttered Adrianos.

The father-son pair were chatting, completely relaxed in the slowly growing darkness of the vale's evening. The five men spying on them were nothing more than shadows in the trees, so it was doubtful whether they would have been seen even if the two had been paying attention.

"They certainly match their descriptions," muttered Timotheos.

"They're our targets, for sure," responded Adrianos.

"Should we attack now? They certainly aren't expecting it..." one of the other men asked.

"No. This supposed 'Artorias' is giving me a bad vibe. I think he's stronger than I am, but his aura isn't the easiest to read..." responded Timotheos. "We proceed with the original plan, wait until night, then infiltrate the compound and kill them in their sleep."

They watched Artorias and Leon walk to the entrance tunnel and disappear within.

Timotheos and his kill team stayed in those shadows for another six hours, watching the tunnel and waiting for the sun to finish setting, then watching the moon slowly rise.

Timotheos was quietly impressed with the detail in the wards protecting the fort, as with his magic senses he could see the wraiths and banshees that wandered the forest, but none ever strayed too close to the clearing. This place had been made very safe from the dangers of the forest.

'But it's not safe from me...' he thought, glancing up at the moon as it neared its peak.

"Let's do this," he muttered, and the team shot out from their hiding place, and arrived at the entrance tunnel in seconds.

Once there, they quickly shed their shadows, as they were terrible for interacting with the physical world, given the incorporeality of shadows. For stealth, shadow magic was invaluable, but when they need to get past a magically sealed door, there was little they could do but step out from the shadows.

As one of the men quickly undid the wards on the door, the rest quietly drew their weapons. Adrianos had his sword, and Timotheos had one as well, but the rest all had shorter daggers, perfect for fighting in extremely tight spaces.

The man working on the door smiled derisively. These wards could barely even keep out a fourth-tier mage! After a bit of magic applied to the proper places, the wards shattered, and he swung the door open. Then, he too drew his dagger, and the team filed into the tunnel, immediately making for the inner door.

Had they been a bit slower or a bit more attentive, they might have noticed a glyph on the back of the first door gently pulse, then vanish.

As their door guy got to work examining the wards on the inner door, the outer door slammed closed, and the tunnel was plunged into darkness. Timotheos and his team were startled, but they were professionals, and it took only a moment for them to pull out small magic lanterns about the size of a watch, illuminating the tunnel.

Timotheos looked around, confused, trying to figure out why the door had slammed shut, but the lanterns had only been activated for a few seconds before the stone bricks on the walls cracked and splintered. The team had a brief moment to silently curse, and then the walls imploded with an earthshaking blast.

The tunnel was filled with broken and shattered stone fragments, and the team was right in the middle of it. It felt like every inch of their body was hit with a piece of stone.

They were left stunned and disorientated, but being powerful mages, they were left with little more than cuts and bruises. Adrianos was the sole exception, as he was the weakest of the group. He had a long sliver of stone about the length of his hand stuck in his chest, and he was bleeding from the ears.

None of them had the time to recover after the implosions, however, as the destroyed walls revealed large water runes. They immediately activated, and the tunnel was completely flooded in seconds. This was followed by a deep bass sound, like the rumbling of huge stones reverberating throughout the forest for several miles.

Now, the team began to panic. The man working on the inner door found that it was far more heavily reinforced and warded, and he doubted he would be able to get through it even if he weren't in danger of drowning, and the outer door had closed, locking them in the tunnel.

Timotheos, being the strongest and most composed of the team, took a moment to assess his situation. He figured that if he put all his power into one attack, he might be able to break through one of the doors. Breaking through the inner door was out of the question, as it would leave them vulnerable as they exited the tunnel, so he quickly swam back to the outer door.

New, stronger wards had appeared on the inside of the door, as if to mock the team's previous attitude, but Timotheos paid it no mind. At higher tiers, a mage isn't restricted to one type of elemental magic, though they'll usually stick with the type they're most proficient at in combat. Timotheos and his team could use shadow magic, but it was poorly suited to actual combat after their cover is blown, so if they had to fight, they'd use a variety of different powers.

In Timotheos' case, he was able to use wind magic. He concentrated his magic into his sword, and the water was repelled a few inches away from it. He then swung his sword at the door, putting all his strength and power behind the strike. An enormous blast of air hit the door and shook it violently. The door held, but the wood it was made of began to splinter and bend. Timotheos followed up with a second attack, and then a third. He kept striking the door until finally, after half a dozen strikes, it burst free from its frame.

The water surged through the opening, but the depression leading into the tunnel wasn't very big, so it didn't go far. Timotheos and his team were still able to swim out of the tunnel and drag themselves back onto dry land, however.

After taking a few moments to catch their breath, and Adrianos removing the stone sliver still lodged in his chest with a wince of pain, they looked back at the fort.

“What’s the chances they didn’t hear any of that?” one of the men asked.

“Non-existent,” replied Timotheos. His eyes wandered over to the walls. They had been warded to keep away the beasts of the forest, not repel humans. There were alarm enchantments at the top, though stealth had been completely blown at this point. “Fuck it. We’re going over the walls.” Timotheos growled angrily.

They all knew that they had lost the element of surprise, so no one argued with him. They just gripped their weapons with renewed resolve and leaped over the fifteen-foot-high walls.

There, they were greeted with the sight of Artorias standing by the central obelisk, sword in hand, and fury evident on his face. His killing intent soared, hitting them like a brick wall, but they too had powerful killing auras, and they were left largely unaffected. Timotheos and his three men quickly spread out to surround Artorias, while Adrianos looked around for Leon, who they couldn’t see.

“You all have made a grave mistake in coming here...” spat Artorias as his body became wreathed in lightning. He raised his sword and attacked.