

The Storm King

Chapter 14: Two Journeys

It took an enormous effort for Roland to get out of bed the next morning. He lay there with his sleeping wife in his arms for almost an hour before he could muster the willpower to get up.

Melissa, for her part, didn't make it easy. He had woken her as he got up, and began to dress, but she just lay there, without a stitch of clothing on. Needless to say, Roland's willpower wavered, and it took the couple another hour before they managed to leave the bedroom.

By now, the sun was high in the sky, and servants were scuttling around the estate preparing for the departure of Roland and his retinue. Roland himself spent the rest of the morning having a late breakfast with Melissa and their son.

But, inevitably, it came time for Roland to leave, so he had to head for his dressing room just off the armory, where Luke helped him into his silver runic armor. Roland had told his knights not to bring their own armor, as it would slow them down when crossing the Frozen Mountains, but he was a paladin, and it was expected that he would wear his gleaming silver armor and blood-red cape, emblazoned with the paladin sigil.

Once suited up, Roland made for the entrance of the villa, where several more servants were waiting with his three knights, their men-at-arms, squires, and the horses. Luke hurried forward to take the reins of his and Roland's horses, while Roland gave one last goodbye kiss to Melissa and their boy.

"Everyone ready?" Roland asked as he mounted his horse. Everyone nodded, mounted their own horses, and the group set off.

Melissa watched them go as calmly as she could, but as soon as they had ridden past view, she could no longer suppress her tears. It took her a few minutes to compose herself, but when she realized that the servants were waiting on her next orders, she immediately straightened up, handed her son to the nanny, and began instructing the servants.

"Get the stables clean! There won't be any horses in there for a while, and I want it spotless when my husband returns. And bring me Gracchus. I want an update on that paperwork, and on how well our latest foundry has been operating."

There were three young ladies at Melissa's side. They were common-born women but had been trained as scribes. Roland had hired them to act as her assistants, and when they heard her commands, they immediately relayed them to the servants as required.

Melissa sighed wistfully, took one last look in the direction Roland had ridden off in and went back into the house. She now planned to throw herself into her work until he returned.

As for Roland, he felt the same pain of separation, but he was in front of his knights. He could be affectionate with his family at home, but now he was Roland the Paladin and had to be their cool and calm leader. He maintained a stoic expression and led his knights out of the city.

The capital was an enormous city, with a population of several million. It took almost the entire day of riding before they had left the suburbs, and almost a dozen more before they finally made it to the Great Plateau, the last region they had to cross before entering the Frozen Mountains.

It was fairly boring the entire way, but they made good time. There wasn't much conversation, as Roland pushed them hard, but there was no trouble on the royal highway. Roland's instinct was to stay at the cheapest inns on the way north, but he was now a paladin, and had several nobles in his party, so he compromised and allowed them all to stay at much nicer places.

Dame Sheira, for her part, was quite grateful. She knew that Roland had little desire for the luxurious trappings of nobility, but she had grown up as the second-born child of a marquis and was used to a standard of living far above that of a cheap inn.

Victoria, her squire, a young girl of seventeen, was also noble-born, and appreciated the finer things much more than Sheira, however. The lady knight had to reprimand her squire several times on the road for complaining about lodgings.

No one else made a sound about it, though, which was fairly surprising, as there was one more noble in the group, one of Sir Andrew's men-at-arms. This man was quiet and rarely stood out, in stark contrast to how most nobility acted. Any other high-born would have demanded a knighthood by now, but he still served as a man-at-arms, even though he was a fourth-tier mage.

What was even more odd about him was his background. He had come from a city that had been recently granted to a noble family that had moved to the kingdom less than a decade ago, known as the Isynians. Twelve years ago, when the king had appointed the head of their house as governor of a large and prosperous city, there had been some pushback from older families, but the king hadn't budged on the issue. Fortunately, Lord Justin, the head of House Isynos, was a private man who rarely made public appearances, and his family was only marginally more social. Eventually, the clamor around his appointment died down, and most simply forgot about him.

There wasn't much known about this new house, not even where they had come from. All anyone knew was that they had come from 'south'. And now there was a man from that house serving one of Roland's knights.

There were some knights in Roland's retinue that openly distrusted this 'Adrianos Isynos' when Sir Andrew introduced him, but in the year and a half since he arrived, he more than proved himself in battle, eventually achieving acceptance among the other knights and men-at-arms.

This group made their way further north, passing the city of Teira, the seat of the old Thunder Kings. Roland had always wanted to visit this city, walk its streets, and see the grand palace where the Archdukes of House Raime lived. Apparently, their palace was so majestic that it made the palace in the capital look like a beggar's hovel. It had been an enormous structure, with gigantic halls seemingly built for giants, baths so large they could fit an entire battalion, and luxurious apartments that left House Raime's guests so pampered that many almost burst into tears when it came time to leave.

But now, all that remained of this once jaw-droppingly gorgeous palace were a few broken walls, lonely columns, and shattered stone. The last Archduke that ruled the Great Plateau was Kyros Raime, who, alongside his eldest son, had been assassinated almost fifteen years ago, not even a year after his only other son had disappeared after an attack on his villa in the capital. King Julius had loved Archduke Kyros like a brother, and openly wept when he heard the news. He decreed that no one was to ever build upon the old palace grounds again and that its remains would be a memorial to House Raime.

But there was more to the city than just the palace. There were the immense lightning rods, that collected the lightning from the frequent storms in the area and channeled it into a training holy ground for lightning mages.

There was Konstantine's Dome, a staggeringly large arena built into a crater that could seat over two hundred thousand people. All kinds of sports and magic competitions were held under the massive painted dome, which depicted a great bird of prey surrounded by rain and lightning pulling a horned sea serpent out of the raging ocean.

And then there was the plateau itself, which was regarded as a paradise for just about everyone. Green grass, trees with leaves of every color, clear and gentle rivers, and stunning flowers, both medicinal and decorative.

But as much as Roland wanted to see the sights, he and his party could only stay one night in the city. In the morning, he sighed in dejection as they rode past the last building of this great city. *'Maybe on our way back, we can stop for a few days.'*, he thought to himself.

A few days later, the group arrived at Clear Ice Fortress. It was a giant castle of black stone, guarding a large wall of clear enchanted ice on the northern side. The wall was almost a hundred feet tall and stretched the entire half mile gap between mountains that the fortress guarded. The mountains at the two ends of the wall were similarly fortified, being covered in small forts. Any northern barbarian stupid enough to attack Clear Ice Fortress would be surrounded on three sides once they came down into the valley.

The knights were exhausted as they brought their horses in past the fortress' southern wall and prepared themselves for the last good night of sleep they would have before the march north.

But unbeknownst to them, two men in the vale to the east of their destination had set off on a journey of their own at the same time. They were Artorias and Leon, and their destination was the same as the knights, the Brown Bear Tribe, the Bull Kingdom's primary ally north of the Frozen Mountains.

It had taken Leon a month to get used to his new strength and begin training in earnest again, and Artorias had decided that they had enough furs to justify the journey west to the Brown Bears for trade. The two gathered up the furs they intended to take with and packed them onto an enchanted sleigh. This sleigh had rudimentary wind enchantments carved onto its bottom that allowed it to float about a foot off the ground, making it good for transporting cargo. The two would barely have to pull to get their furs to the tribe's market.

This was a journey that the two had made many times before, about once every six months for the past decade. It would typically take three to four days of travel to arrive at the city, even though it was only around eighty miles away. Of course, Artorias could make it in less than an hour, but Leon was much slower. Now that he made it to the second-tier, however, Artorias fully expected to be able to shave half a day or more off their travel time.

They set off the same morning as Roland and his team, heading for a mountain pass in the west. First, though, they had to head north, as there was an enormous canyon running north-south not too far to the west of the purple grass clearing. It had incredibly smooth sides, though it was starting to crumble in places. Artorias had theorized that a mage of at least the ninth or tenth-tier had carved the canyon with a sword strike, and so he had taken to calling it the 'Divine Scar'.

It was well over five hundred feet deep, where the last rays of light vanished into darkness, so going around was always the best option. Leon and Artorias went north for about a dozen miles before turning west, towards the mountain pass.

It took a few more hours to reach it, and they settled in for a late lunch. There wasn't too much to chat about, so Artorias mainly focused on reinforcing Leon's understanding of basic enchantments. From simple runes to complex runic glyphs, Artorias did the best he could to explain the concepts behind their carving.

Leon soaked it all up, but Artorias was no master. He could tell that Leon had both a passion and talent for enchantments just based on the practice ones he drew on spell paper and the questions he asked about their underlying theories, but he wouldn't get very far just asking him. All Artorias knew were a few first-aid spells and practical enchantments he was taught as part of his knight's training twenty years ago, such as

some defensive wards and sanitation enchantments for use in setting up a fortified camp, and a few to apply to weapons.

But he had done a bit of research into his family's enchantments. Most were related to lightning, of course, and he didn't have very much material to research in the first place, but what little he had learned had been used when he carved the obelisk in the center of their compound.

Those few days passed quickly, but they eventually left the mountain pass and proceeded through the neighboring Vale towards one of only two cities that exceeded twenty thousand inhabitants north of the Frozen Mountains.

This particular Vale was much less colorful than the Forest of Black and White. All the trees here only had regular brown bark and green leaves, as opposed to the black and white tree trunks and multicolored leaves of Leon and Artorias' home. There were fewer flowers, as most of the flora were bushes and grass, with neither being the wide gradient of colors seen further to the east, either.

Whenever they went west to trade, Leon was always reminded that the Forest of Black and White was something special. It wasn't just the vibrant plant life either, as no other Vale was so infested with dark and powerful creatures. The rivers in the west were not filled with river nymphs, one didn't have to constantly be on the lookout for tree sprites when in the forests, and wraiths were almost unheard-of west of the mountain pass.

All in all, the vale the Brown Bear Tribe lived in had little difference to the forests seen in the south. It just surrounded a large plain, roughly sixty miles in diameter. This plain was mostly filled with small villages and equally small farms, but the tribesmen had built a city in the very center of the vale. Most of the buildings were made of wood, and rarely exceeded a single story tall, but at just over twenty thousand townspeople, it was the largest settlement in the Northern Vales.

The father and son pair finally arrived at the city before noon on the third day, almost a full day earlier than they would have before Leon's ritual. They weren't particularly tired, but Artorias decided to look for a place to stay before anything else. He was a good friend of the Brown Bear clan chief, Torfinn Ice-Eyes, and had stayed with him before, so the chief's hall was their destination.