

The Storm King

Chapter 20: The Village

On the way back to the storehouse, Sir Andrew briefly looked back at the longhouse, then turned to Luke. "Are you sure that was the guy?"

"Yes, Sir. Absolutely," replied Luke.

"It was him. No doubt," Victoria added.

"What are you lot talking about back there?" asked Roland.

Sir Andrew immediately answered. "That boy who joined us at the table, it seems the squires ran into him earlier."

"Oh? That was him?" Luke had told Roland about the encounter with the thugs and Leon after coming back from the failed shopping trip, so Roland knew about Leon.

Roland then frowned. It seemed that this boy was the son of that mysterious man who was also at the table. Roland had wanted to try and speak with him alone, but he was engrossed in conversation with Torfinn, talking about the various fighting styles of the tribesmen and which tribe or village would beat which in a battle.

Suffice it to say, Roland never got a chance to strike up a conversation. Freyja just kept teasing the boy, this 'Little Lion' and didn't pay any attention to them, so the knights had eaten in peace. With nothing else to do once they finished eating, they simply left.

"Well, we'll see if we can talk to them on the march to this bandit camp. Given the attitudes of the tribesmen, I'd also prefer if no one went far from the storehouse until it's time to leave."

The knights nodded in acknowledgment of Roland's order, and they continued down the road back to the storehouse.

True to his word, Torfinn had food and water delivered, enough to keep the party from having to eat travel rations for about a week, which they were quite grateful for.

Roland and his party barely left the storehouse during the next three days. They just laid around getting as much rest as they possibly could. Victoria had wanted to go back out and look for silkgrass, but Luke managed to convince her not to, given how the last shopping trip went.

But, the time came, and they rose early in the morning to meet with Torfinn and his warriors. They went to the southern gate and found that a large number of the warriors had gathered already. There were two wagons hitched to oxen, and about two hundred warriors ready for battle. There were almost one hundred first and second-tier warriors among them, with only a handful of the third. Asbjorn and Freyja were the only fourth-tier warriors present, and Torfinn was the only one of the fifth-tier.

Then there was Artorias and Leon, standing a good distance away from the war party, Roland paid extra attention to them. Leon was clearly in the second-tier, but his aura had a stability and thickness to it that Roland had only seen from the children of high nobles down south. Artorias was also just as imperceptible as before, which the other knights finally noticed. They hadn't been paying attention very much during the feast, as their stomachs were too empty, but now they were thinking rationally and grew wary of these two.

"Ah, finally here!" Torfinn called out to the knights upon their arrival.

Roland smiled at the chief, waving his hand as he approached. "My people are ready, Chief Torfinn. These bandits will soon be dealt with and won't trouble you any more."

Torfinn's smile grew wider, and he shouted to the crowd of warriors. "Of course they won't! We'll kill them all or drive them out!" The warriors all shouted in response, raising their weapons and banging their wooden shields. It was a loud display, but over quite quickly.

Torfinn turned back to Roland. "We still have a few stragglers coming in, but otherwise, we were just waiting on you knights before setting off. Now that you're here, we can get this march underway. Let's move out!"

And with that, the war party began marching down the road.

Roland and the knights just stared. The warriors moved completely without formations, without discipline. There were a few boasting about how many of the bandits they would kill, and what kind of loot they'd bring home, which just cemented the fact that they were all just a horde of barbarians in the minds of the knights.

Roland sighed. "Well, let's go." He gestured after Torfinn, and his party quickly caught up with the Chief.

It was a boring march. They weren't going far, barely more than eighty miles. The war party would reach their destination in less than three days, so long as they kept to the road.

The leaders all marched in front, with Torfinn, Freyja, and Asbjorn leading the way. Roland and the knights marched a little bit behind them, and the warrior horde followed them.

The knights were initially dismayed at what the warriors were showing off, as the lack of marching formation wasn't the only problem they had with the Valemen. Their weapons left much to be desired, first off, as the quality of metalworking in the Vales was quite poor. Consequently, most warriors had terrible-looking iron axes, which any second-tier mage could snap with ease. There wasn't even a single enchanted weapon among them! A few of the stronger warriors had better steel, probably obtained from the trade with the very smugglers they were going to kill, but that accounted for barely even one in thirty.

The next problem the knights had was the armor, or rather, the lack of it. The knights had to leave their horses down south, which meant they had to leave their heavy enchanted steel armor with them, but they at least had thick lightly enchanted leather armor. The tribesmen, on the other hand, were barely even dressed properly, with many not even wearing shirts, let alone armor.

"Lucky they're only fighting bandits," muttered Sir Roger.

It seemed Sir Andrew agreed, because he said, "Indeed. They'd be torn apart by any professional army worth its salt."

Roland quickly silenced them with a look. Fortunately, it didn't seem that any of the tribesmen heard them. The knights weren't participating just for their own personal mission, but also to heal the broken alliance between the Bull Kingdom and the Brown Bear Tribe.

Artorias and Leon were nowhere to be found, which Roland noted. They had started the journey with the warriors but seemed to disappear once no one was paying attention to them. This disappointed Roland, as his desire to speak with Artorias had grown after hearing him converse with Chief Torfinn at the feast, and Roland had noticed that Artorias spoke with a different accent than Torfinn. In fact, Artorias' accent was closer to that of the people who lived on the Northern Plateau.

Roland increased his walking speed a little, catching up to Torfinn.

"Chief Torfinn, I would like to talk with you if it's not too much trouble."

"Go ahead, knight."

"I know your name, as well as the names of your thanes, Asbjorn and Freyja, but I have yet to properly introduce myself to that man who sat next to you at the feast the other day. I noticed him the first day we arrived in Vale Town, and have been eager to speak with him, but I haven't had the opportunity. I'd hoped to talk with him on the march, but he seems to have disappeared..."

"Ah! That man isn't one of my thanes, rather, he's my closest friend in the world. Wraith-Killer, we call him."

“Wraith-Killer? No other name than that?”

“None to share with *you*. He lives to the east, in a neighboring vale. No one lives there, except for him and his son. The place is infested with ice wraiths. No one else would be able to live there, except for the Wraith-Killer.”

“Do you, perhaps, know where he comes from? If that eastern vale has no human life, then he can’t come from there, can he?”

“... Why are you so curious about him?”

Roland paused. There wasn’t any compelling reason, he just couldn’t see through the power of this ‘Wraith-Killer’, and that piqued his interest.

“Is there a problem with my curiosity?”

“Not really, but my friend is a very private man. He wouldn’t live so far away from even our little scrap of civilization if he weren’t. If someone like you—someone I don’t know—starts asking questions, of course I would want to know *why*.”

Roland smiled. “This Wraith-Killer is lucky to have a friend like you. Not everyone would be so protective.”

Torfinn smiled back at Roland. “I don’t know how it works down south, but life is hard here. There aren’t many people around, and enemy raids are frequent. We need to watch out for each other, while we still have each other.”

Roland nodded and ‘hmm’-ed in approval.

“I like that mentality. There are far too many arrogant people born into power in the Kingdom, people who would do anything to retain their power, even throw their friends to the wolves. Well, anyway, do you know when Wraith-Killer might be around again? I’d like to speak with him face-to-face, if possible.”

“Not sure. I said that those two are private, but that doesn’t really do it justice. They actively avoid crowds as much as they can. They may have set off with us, but I doubt they’ll show themselves until we make camp for the night, assuming they show up at all.”

“Very good, I shall look for him then.”

And with that, Roland drifted back and rejoined his knights.

There wasn’t too much to be said about most of the journey to the bandit fort. The war party walked seventy miles down a dirt road, occasionally passing a farming hamlet, and camped by the side of the road, heading for a small village about twelve miles away

from the bandit fort. By Torfinn's estimation, they were to reach it just before dinner time of the second day.

But, about five miles away, as the village was coming into view across the plains and farmland, Torfinn called a stop to the march. The village was covered in thick black smoke, and even from their distance, most of the warriors second-tier and higher could see that most of the buildings were burned.

"Spread out!" shouted Torfinn. He then turned to Asbjorn, and said, "Grab ten first and two second-tier warriors and protect the wagons.

It took less than a minute for the warriors to arrange themselves in a rough battle line about four men deep and wait for Torfinn's signal. Once he saw that everyone was ready and that Asbjorn was with the supply wagons, he began running towards the village.

The warriors followed, with Roland and his party just behind Torfinn and Freyja.

There weren't any sounds coming from the village apart from a few wooden beams that were still smoldering. No cries for help, no clashing of blades, no sounds of life.

The warriors were all very fit, and even the slowest could reach the village in less than half an hour, but Torfinn and the stronger warriors grew impatient and took off.

The chief and his warriors of the third-tier and above reached the village in five minutes. They scoured the village, something that didn't take very long as the village was quite small, but found no living villager. There were a few bodies, either charred or cut down with blades, but not enough to fill the village.

"What the hell happened here!?" Torfinn shouted in rage.

Freyja ran over after the warriors had almost finished searching the houses. "We found about two dozen bodies, not nearly everyone. The food and silkgrass stores are completely empty."

"Two dozen? This village had almost ten times that many," Torfinn growled, clearly infuriated.

Suddenly, the two heard a shout coming from nearby. "Over here!"

They responded with lightning speed, and when they arrived, they found Leon waving from a hovel near the edge of the village. He directed them inside, and they saw Artorias crouching over a man covered in blood and pinned by a collapsed wall.

"He's still alive," Artorias said, not even needing to look up.

Torfinn hurried forward. "Is he conscious?"

"No." Artorias had a few healing spells out, pressing the paper against the man's injuries. The wounds were slowly closing up, but he showed no signs of stirring. "He might not wake. He's already lost a lot of blood."

Roland and Sir Roger had heard the shout as well and arrived in the small house. The two knight's eyes widened when they saw the healing spells, but they kept quiet.

Once the healing spells had been applied, Artorias easily lifted the entire wall up off the man, and Leon grabbed him and pulled him out of the house, laying him down on the ground just outside.

Torfinn looked towards his friend with a somber look. "Wraith-Killer, thank you. Even if that man doesn't live, thank you for trying."

"Don't mention it, my friend. This is only what a person ought to do and needs no gratitude."

Torfinn called out to a few of the lower-tiered warriors who had finally arrived in the village, and they came and picked up the man, taking him towards the center of the village. The plan was to stay in the village for the night and proceed towards Harald Golden-Hair's scout camp the following day, and the village in ruins wasn't going to change that. Even now, the warriors were clearing out the bodies and cleaning up a few of the houses.

"I have a suspicion that the smugglers have finally, truly, turned to banditry. This was their doing, I'd bet my life on it," Torfinn said. He looked around at the burned houses, then at the bodies in the center of the village. "I'm going to kill them all for this."

