

Interlude - the Burning in the Stormlands

He ran through the burning village as the embers flickered in the air and smoke rose high into the sky, obscuring the light of the moons. He wondered if the Goddess could see him through all the smoke. The dying screams echoed all around him, but he could tell that there were less and less of them.

The sound of flapping wings, as claps of thunder, made him duck beneath a wagon left abandoned in the paved dirt street. He looked up hesitantly, trying to make out what manner of beast had attacked them. It had to be one of the great drakes from the mountains, momma always told him how terrible they were. How they enjoyed eating little boys when they were being naughty.

He knew that they had to send word to the Keep, let the Knights know. They would be able to deal with the drake, like in momma's stories. Only, his feet were too short to get him there fast enough, and he had no Mask. He had to return home, find momma and papa. They would know what to do.

If anyone survived, he thought to himself, but then quickly shook his head. They were still alive, he knew it. They would scold him for going down to the river to play by himself, but once he found them, everything would be alright again. A part of him whispered that he should've run away when he saw the village burning, that his small bucket with water wouldn't have helped any.

Through the flames he saw a shape hover above the burning tavern, just a shadow in his eyes, with only wide wings recognizable to him. It stayed there for a few seconds, and then it dove down through the stone

roof, crashed through the ground and into the tavern nestled in the cave beneath. A scream sounded from within the building, then the shape exploded out of the tavern, and flew high. It had a woman in its claws, he could hear her pleading, screaming. He recognized her voice, Vallia, the tavernkeeper. She would always give him tasty pastries when he came to visit.

Her screams were cut short, then she fell and hit the ground with a loud sound of breaking bones.

The sound of beating wings moved away, and he thought that it was his chance. He had to be brave now, like the knights in stories. He crawled out from his hiding place and started running. His breath was thundering in his ears, his heart fought to escape his chest, but he ran.

He didn't see or hear the monster as it grabbed him. There was only a short stab of pain in his neck, and then nothing.

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Knight Mage Herim of Roughrock walked through the village, leaving footsteps in the ash and soot. The smoke was thick still, but he was of a High Investment so it did not bother him as such. Still, his eyes teared up, and streaks trailed down his cheeks. Not from the smoke, but from the sights that he beheld. The corpses were covered in blood soaked ash, the entrails were spread across the streets. Death had come to the village of Platfield. So much death. He had not expected this when the call had reached him. Even now, seeing it with his own eyes, he could barely believe it.

Herim had served during the last conflict, nearly a thousand years ago now. He had been there on the beaches, fighting in the red and blue sand colored by the blood of Elves and YoKai-ni. Even with only two of their tribes raiding the Elvaros coast, there had been death unlike anything that he had seen before. He had protected the plains for centuries before then, had fought animals that ventured too far, and occasional monster. And still he had seen nothing like the raids. He shuddered to imagine what it had been like before, when the YoKai-ni first arrived on Kirios and all their races marched to war.

But this... there was a different kind of brutality here, a thing that he couldn't quite comprehend. The smoke cleared as he walked and he reached the village square. Wagons were overturned and half burnt, a few broken bodies lined the streets, two Knights knelt in the center, by a small body. *A child*—he steeled his emotions lest he wept more at the tragedy. The Village of Platfield had been blessed with a child, a young boy, just ten turnings ago. Herim remembered the celebration of the birth, the Knights of the Stormpeak Keep had been invited along with all the nobility in a thousand leagues. All of the Stormlands had rejoiced and celebrated.

Herim approached and the two Knights stood, their helmets cradled in their arms and their faces marked with sorrow as tears cleared lines through their soot-marred cheeks. Right they were in their mourning, for there was no tragedy greater than a death of a child. Herim looked down and saw the frail looking body, pale and surprisingly intact compared to the others. Except for the wound on the child's neck. He knelt next to the boy and bowed his head, he whispered a prayer to the Goddess of the Eternal Woods asking her to shelter the young child's soul on its path to the Holy Forest beyond.

After a long moment, he stood and turned to the two Knights waiting. "Report," he ordered with a coarse voice.

The two Knights saluted, their stances perfectly straight. “Knight Mage,” the older of the two started. “We’ve gotten word that the village had burned down from a traveler who noticed the smoke. Immediately a squad of Knight Hunters was sent to investigate, expecting a monster attack. They... what they found was...”

The Knight swallowed; he was obviously struggling with the sights around them. *He was young*, Herim thought to himself, *a century at most*. He understood the young man’s hesitation.

“Did they say what manner of storming monster did this?” Herim asked, barely able to contain his anger.

The two Knights glanced at each other, and then back at him. “The Knight Hunters don’t know, sir,” he said at last.

Herim frowned. “A migrating animal? Or a blighted monster?” He asked, then continued when he saw that they had no answer for him. “Where are the Knight Hunters? I would speak with them directly.”

“They’ve been inspecting some of the bodies in the camp outside the village, we can take you there sir,” the Knight said.

Herim nodded and let them guide him through the village. He spared only one last glance for the dead child. They couldn’t move the body, not until a mother arrived, the child was unnamed. It would be an insult for someone of the martial profession to touch an unnamed child. No, they would wait for a mother to stand in the stead of the child’s own. To say the rites and cry for the loss that had fallen upon the People of Elvaros.

Herim turned away and followed the Knights.

They found the Knight Hunters in a large black tent, marked with the signet of their Order, a bow on a silver shield. Once inside, Herim saw to

men looking at a body of an elderly man placed on a table. They raised their heads and looked up at the intrusion, then immediately straightened and saluted at his entrance.

“Knight Mage, sir,” they said in unison.

“At ease,” Herim said. “Tell me what you have found? I am told that you do not know what manner of beast caused this tragedy.”

The Knight Hunters exchanged hesitant looks, then met his eyes. “We are... uncertain, sir. Nothing that we’ve seen matches any beast known to live on Elvaros, animal or monster both.”

Herim’s ear twitched at that, and he walked over. “Explain,” Herim narrowed his eyes.

The Knight Hunter with the highest rank, marked by the third feather in his hair answered. “There are two types of corpses left in the village, the first are the people that had been torn apart. It is clear that this had been done by brute strength and not skill, as far as we are able to tell at least. Based on the last census, the highest Investment in the village was a retired **Guardman**, at Fourth Investment.”

Herim’s eyebrow rose at that. “A Fourth Investment **Guardman** should have been able to handle most beasts in all of the Stormlands.” Probably more like all of them. The Knight Orders of Stormkeep made sure that the mountains and the plains around them were cleared of any high Investment beasts, they routinely culled the drake populations in the mountains. The chance that something slipped through was slim, but at most it would be at Fifth Investment—and even that was a stretch. It would have to be very old or had to have slaughtered thousands of other beasts, which would not have gone unnoticed by the Knight Hunters patrolling the area. A Fourth Investment **Guardman** would’ve at least

been able to hold the beast down or chase it off, he would definitely been able to leave it injured.

The Knight Hunter nodded at Herim's words. "We found him outside of the tavern, his limbs had been torn off his body sir."

Herim blinked, that was... A Fourth Investment Mask was a threshold point, people at those Investments were tougher, their bodies hardier. It would've been very difficult to do something like that even to a **Trader**, let alone someone who had a martial Mask.

"Did you find the village Ledger?" Herim asked. It would be best if they made sure, rather than assume.

The lower ranked Knight Hunter nodded then walked over to the table in the corner of the tent.

"We've been hoping to have it unlocked at the keep, we were not aware that you've been summoned," the Knight Hunter said as he offered the Ledger to Herim.

"I believe that this situation warrants an exception to the rules," Herim said. Unsealing of Investment Ledgers was not a light thing, and was usually only done at Knight Keeps. The purpose of the Ledgers wasn't to gain an advantage, it was private information. Their keeping was an old tradition, hailing back to the last war. Their purpose was to have the information available to the Knight Orders if there was ever need for conscription in times of war.

Usually, the highest ranking region official would be present at the opening, but... Herim believed that the death of the entire village warranted an exception. He had the authority for it.

He reached around his neck and pulled out a chain with a gray round amulet bearing the signet of Stormkeep Orders—a tall mountain surrounded by clouds.

He placed it over the Ledger, and the enchantment activated, unlocking the book.

Slowly he opened it and searched through the pages until he found one dedicated to the Guardsman, then he looked it over.

Leoj of Platfield

Mask of the Guardsman:

Fourth Investment; Third Carving

Ornament of the Farmer:

No Investment, Seventh Carving

Attributes:

Physical: C

Weave: *E*

Esoteric: *E*

Skills:

[Shield Bash]

[Stalwart Stance]

[Reassuring Presence]

[Calming Aura]

[Parry]

[Keen Eyesight]

[Danger Sense]

[Farmer's Strength]

It was unfortunate that he had taken a Farmer Ornament in his Fourth Investment, it was unlikely that he would've ever risen to the Fifth Investment to consolidate it. Still, it was as they had suspected. [Farmer's Strength] was enough to increase the physical attributes to a high **C** ranking on the 4th Investment. Which meant that the Guardsman had a significant advantage, no beast in the area should have been able to do that to him. Not easily at least.

Herim closed the Ledger and stored it in the bag on his hip before turning back to the Knight Hunters.

“It is as you have assumed,” Herim told them. “He had a **C** ranking in his physical attributes. Continue,” Herim waved his hand.

The Knight Hunter turned back to the body. “Aside from his limbs being torn off, his ribcage had been shattered, his internal organs pulped to mush. The wounds are consistent with brute force trauma.”

“A skill?” Herim asked.

“We discovered bruises that are... consistent with impact from small blunt instruments,” Knight Hunter said slowly. “A purely physical skill is... possible.”

Herim narrowed his eyes, detecting that there was something more to it than what the Knight Hunter said. “What is it?”

Knight Hunter glanced at the others, then back at him. “I’ve used [Wound Inspect],” he said finally. “The injuries were not done by a beast.”

It took Herim a moment to realize what he meant; it was so absurd that not even he could believe it. “You are saying that *someone* did this?” Herim whispered harshly. “*Someone* killed a child?”

The three Knight Hunters cowered under his stare. But then their leader spoke. “The skill return was... confusing, sir, I can only say for certain that it wasn’t a mindless monster or beast.”

“Not a mindless one?” Herim asked.

The Knight Hunter nodded. “I supposed that a beast could’ve awakened, but...” He shook his head. “Sir, I don’t believe that to be the case.”

“Explain,” Herim gestured with his hand.

The Knight Hunter turned to the body at the table. “We’ve tracked the origin of the killings to the village tavern. From there, six bodies had been torn apart, some with what appear to be claw marks, all on the way to the square. From there... the deaths were everywhere, and it is hard to tell what else happened because the fire burned most of the evidence. What we can tell is that all the rest of the villagers died the same way.”

Herim tilted his head, and the Knight Hunter continued.

“They all had blood drained from their bodies. And look here,” he pointed at the body. “Claws that match the arrangement of an Elven hand bit into the flesh here near the armpits on both sides, then they pulled up. We believe that who or whatever this was, could fly. It picked people up, drained them of blood, then dropped them from great heights to break against the ground.”

Herim remembered the twisted bodies in the village. “And you don’t think that it was a beast why?”

“All villagers are accounted for sir,” Knight Hunter said.

Herim frowned, not understanding.

The Knight Hunter took a deep breath, then spoke. “Beasts kill to feed, even monsters do. No one was eaten here, sir, no one has any body parts missing, just blood.”

Herim felt his heart freeze for a moment. “A cult of some kind? Blood sacrifice?”

The last time something like that happened, the Dwarves lost three cities and half of their tunnel network. Five thousand years and they were yet to reclaim it from whatever it was that the cultists had summoned. If someone was trying to do the same thing on Elvaros...

The Knight Hunters didn’t answer Herim’s question. He didn’t expect them to. “They killed a child,” he whispered at last. “No Elf would ever do something like that, cultist or not. This...”

He didn’t know what to think. Had some other kingdom decided to attack, to break the Shadow’s Peace? This was too far above his standing.

He had to return to the Keep and speak with the Knight Commanders. But one thing was certain, whoever had done this would be hunted down, and they would pay for what they had done.