

## *The Firefly*

Winter approached, and with it came a familiar, uncomfortable darkness. As the last leaves prepared to fall, rattling amongst the branches like hushed courtiers spreading the latest noble gossip, the message they whispered was one of foreboding and dread for the people of Norn.

Baran Hunter, former warden of the Kingswood of Whitenorn, rose from his bed with a stiffness unfamiliar to younger men. He cast one squinted eye toward the pink glow on the eastern horizon, and with a heavy sigh pulled on his riding trousers and heavy boots. Briefly, he contemplated the value of running a blade over the snow-dusted stubble on his chin, but decided there were better uses of his limited time on a morning like this one.

Today was the day the Firefly caravan would begin its journey north to the Evergrove, a forest of rare trees that grow regardless of the sunlight they receive, which when cut into firewood burn brighter, hotter, and longer than any other wood known to man.

The trouble with the Evergrove is that it is a sacred place, home to druids and old world Elves alike - few though they were. And despite the immense value within, no standing army could challenge its inhabitants and hope to emerge victorious. Instead, the Coalition of Lords had brokered a treaty: once per year, a caravan each from Norn and the other surrounding territories was permitted to travel into the grove to harvest up to five wagons of Everwood lumber in exchange for five children of fighting age, to replace those who would inevitably be lost to the night.

With a bit of hardtack hanging haphazardly from his lips, absorbing moisture so as to become what Baran considered *barely edible* on a good day, he unfurled a beautiful vellum map of the region across the stone table near his long-abandoned hearth. His eyes traced the carefully

inked course that would lead him and the caravan from his northern township of Whitenorn south through the wooded glades where he spent his youth, beyond the Bay of Kings, and into the Heavensmont: a range of granite mountains that had existed since before the arrival of man, wherein lay the Evergrove. In years past, before the strength of the sun had begun to fail, when the light still shone through the full length of a day, it would be a three-day journey. Yet now, as the nights continued to lengthen, the dangers that lurked within the darkness meant it could only safely be done in six in the best of conditions. An experienced woodsman, Baran knew most trips this time of year would take no fewer than nine days if they were lucky. And so for the third time he counted the rations in his pack, making note of the extras stowed for the young ones traveling with them to the grove.

Satisfied with the quantity of spare foodstuffs and waterskins tucked safely within his bag, Baran reasoned that with the time he had saved by not shaving he could justify checking his equipment one more time. He had at least half an hour before Brother Kells, Paladin and chapter master of the Normite Fireflies, arrived and called the assembly. Baran rolled up his map, placing it back into its weatherproof scroll case, and began to lay out his effects - those things which enabled him to go out into the night and return home in one piece.

Like most hunters, he kept things largely practical, opting to carry a spear, a bow, and a hunting knife; each one a tool as much as a weapon. As he looked over them all once again, his gaze lingered on the knife; it was something he had purchased in the Bay of Kings some years prior from a heavy-set foreign trader who smelled strongly of exotic spices. He recalled how its forward-curving blade and hypnotic-patterned steel had mesmerized him. He also remembered, fondly, the face his wife had made when he brought it home, fussing at him over the price it must have fetched. Though she eventually relented, accepting that his new station as Warden of the

Kingswood meant that they could afford to treat themselves on occasion, it was likely the new silver jewelry he had purchased on his next trip to the city that had done the lion's share of convincing.

With his armaments secure he turned once more to the clothing and other supplies he had packed for the journey. Basic travel essentials like a winter cape, leather patching kits, first aid supplies and the like each fit neatly into his pack, and on the outside rested a pair of snares with a trio of claw traps secured snugly to simple clamps and hanging-rings. All in all the gear he carried was far more than what might have been reasonable just ten years ago, but Baran had learned quickly the value of preparing for the worst as the sun set and night approached.

As the yellow-white light of the sun now danced across the surface of the frozen pond just outside his home, he heard the familiar clickety-clack of a heavily laden wagon trundling across the old cobbled marketplace, now home to the heartfire of Whitenorn. That would be Brother Kells, he thought, early as always. Baran quickly shoved what remained of his hardtack into his mouth and set to the grueling task of chewing as he slung his bow over his shoulder, strapped his quiver to his belt, and headed toward the door. He stopped briefly in front of a small polished-silver hand mirror that had once belonged to his daughter, his thoughts lingering on the hope that she was still safe within the castle walls. He made a mental note to hire a scribe to pen her a letter before the caravan left the borders of Norn, and slipped the valuable little circle, wrapped in cloth, into his pocket.

As Baran ducked through the threshold of his sod and thatch home, his heart suddenly leapt into this throat. Despite his every intention of heading to the market square with haste, something in his body kept him locked in place with one foot just inside the door frame. It took him a brief moment to realize that he was drenched with a cold sweat as he reached up, hand

trembling, to the empty hook atop his backpack. Home to perhaps the most important item of the journey, the Firefly lantern, in its place was nothing but cold air, and he cursed in as many languages as he could remember at his own foolishness. Baran ducked back inside, grabbed the lantern, and secured it to its hook before making his way to the market square with purpose.

He found himself thinking that the town had changed considerably over the last decade. Where once the people of Norn had preferred to sprawl, claiming land and building fences with the intent of keeping your neighbor at arm's length, now you could find between four and eight homes built around one of the town's massive bonfires which burned from the moment the shadows grew long until the sun's first light. Practically all of the wood furnishings and construction had been torn down in the early days to be used as fuel, and now it was clay, stone, thatch, or sod which provided shelter from the elements. Of the old township, only the market square remained largely unchanged, its stone foundations and clay bricks providing little immediate value to the people who sought anything that would burn or help them create light.

At nearly every home that Baran passed on his way to the square, a man, woman, or family stood watching solemnly. Some of them made gestures to the heavens, others simply nodded, but all of them knew the gravity of the day. Several of his firefly brethren were already up and about their tasks, as the caravan would need to be on its way before long. Baran saw a fellow lantern-bearer, a skilled lumberjack with an unpleasant personality, speaking with his neighbor Ana. She had volunteered both her middle son and eldest daughter as offerings for the Grove, and now she clung to both their cloaks as they said their tearful goodbyes. It was likely she felt that this was their best hope for survival, and Baran was loath to disagree. The children's father, Ana's husband, had perished the month prior in a tragic misunderstanding with a night

watchman, having been mistaken for an aberrant horror as he walked back to town carrying a stag on his shoulders.

Not far from there, he saw a cadre of guardsmen escorting a group of fletchers carrying several heavy bundles of arrows toward the wagons where the caravan's many teams of shaggy northern horses waited to be hitched. The beasts of burden stood restlessly, whinnying, snorting, and stamping with an impatience which suggested they might be arguing amongst themselves as to which of them carried the worse charge. Meanwhile, other townsfolk continued to help the caravan prepare, loading large water casks and barrels of foodstuffs into the wagon train. Baran quickly hustled to the lead wagon, hoping to find Brother Kells or one of the other senior Fireflies so that he might brief them on the upcoming expedition. This would be Baran's eleventh trip to the Evergrove since the long nights began, and as chief pathfinder for the caravan it was his duty to scout the surrounding area in the weeks leading up to the journey.

At the front of the wagon, he saw something which caused him to involuntarily suck his teeth, prompting the others gathered there to turn their heads and regard him with a curious interest. There stood Brother Kells, wedged defensively between the Marquis of Whitenorn and a young wisp of a woman he did not recognize; her skin like night, painted with a litany of runes and symbols in white and red inks. Just the sight of her caused his hackles to rise and shivers to run from his shoulders to his shins. The Marquis was red in the face, and by the woman's stony expression it was clear she had the upper hand in whatever argument was transpiring.

Held loosely in her grip was a rope, to which were bound a trio of sickly looking children that Baran could only rightly describe as pitiful. Presumably the source of the heated exchange, if these were meant to be their offerings to the Grove, then Baran feared for the amount of lumber which might return with the caravan. He opened his mouth in search of answers, but

Kells, ever the mind-reader, simply gave him a look and subtle shake of the head that told him it was better left alone for now. Baran gestured silently to the scroll case tucked beneath his arm so as not to interrupt the conversation, and Kells indicated that the two of them should step aside to discuss the plan.

The nearby storefront which had been designated as their meeting place was already occupied by three of the chapter's seven senior members. As Baran and Kells ducked inside, the three were quick to look up from their conversation and acknowledge the arrival of their pathfinder and chapter master. There were no salutes, as that was the way of the old world, just hardened men and women who had seen what lurked in the darkness and lived time and time again. Noting the absence of Val and Magnus, Baran quickly set to task unfurling the map once more to explain the route they would take while reporting the findings of his scouting efforts over the last few weeks. As he began to place small carved figures in key locations, indicating landmarks or dangers, Kells finally took notice of the growth along his jawline. The principled man reached out with one gloved hand and lifted Baran's chin with comfortable familiarity before speaking in his calming melodic baritone.

“Growing further from the tenets of your faith, Baran? A man who hides his face from the gods is not a pious man.”

Kells chuckled at his own perceived cleverness while Baran suppressed a laugh, brushing the hand aside with a noncommittal grunt. He continued setting the stage for his scouting report, making sure that each checkpoint was clearly marked and any significant changes from the last year were ready to be explained. Standing opposite the three Senior Fireflies, aside from the chapter master, Baran noted their immaculate state of dress. Each face appeared freshly washed and smooth; even their gambesons looked as though they had been steamed and pressed

moments before donning them. He did momentarily entertain the thought that Lorna, Val, and possibly River had a slight advantage in conforming to Kells' particular dress standards, though in all honesty he appreciated the sense of order that the younger Paladin's rules commanded.

The report itself contained few major surprises or hurdles that the caravan should expect to face. A storm from the east had been slowly crawling in their direction, bringing with it mountains of snow and harsh winds which threatened to slow them down considerably. But Kells assured him that weather would not be an issue, prompting a raised eyebrow from the seasoned woodsman. The stoic expressions of the others in the room indicated that they were aware of something that had not yet been shared with him, and where once that might have sown confusion or paranoia in his mind, Baran had long since found the value in trusting each of the six senior Fireflies to the roles they fulfilled. Once a year for a decade the chapter had traveled, fought, and bled together on this selfsame journey, and every senior member of Kells' chapter, survivors and the fallen alike, had earned that trust. Though it did little to prevent his curious mind from wandering, he knew they would fill him in when the time was right.

A polite cough pulled Baran from his musing, bringing his attention back to the map spread over the table. Sib: a Kabo, strategist, and eldest member of the chapter, was pointing to one of the figures on the map; a small tower carved from stone which Baran had placed on its side. The Heavensmont native was looking at him as though awaiting a response to a question. The tower was now upright, so he assumed that Sib wanted to know if it had been knocked over by mistake. Baran shook his head in quick reply, gathering his thoughts and meeting the piercing gaze of the Kabo's coal-black eyes before speaking;

“We won't be able to reprovision there this year. The Arcanum has fallen, completely. Both the tower and its inhabitants were swallowed by a chasm that opened during the night.”

Without bothering to wait for the inevitable follow up question, he continued;

“No survivors have turned up at any of the nearby townships either. I know it’s a critical step of the journey, so my scouts and I have been looking for a viable alternative. Lake Little is a nearby village which might be able to provide some of the supplies we need. The rest we’ll need to forage along the way. I expect we’ll be relying heavily on Lorna to manage how we ration.”

Sib simply nodded before reaching down and gently laying the tower back on its side. Baran had always found himself somewhat uneasy in the presence of the Heavensmont native-turned-Firefly. Prior to joining the chapter he had been a prisoner of war in the Nornish king’s custody, and the fact that he had volunteered to aid Kells’ chapter of lantern-bearers was something Baran could scarcely hope to understand. The strategist was a man of few words however, and on the occasions when he did speak it was rarely, if ever, about himself.

Baran then turned his attention to Lorna, towering above all of them to the point that she needed to crouch inside of the old shop to avoid the ceiling. He had expected a more immediate response from the quartermaster at the mention of the Arcanum’s fall. Instead, she had her eyes glued to the map, seemingly lost in thought as she habitually chewed on the knuckle of her index finger.

“Hmph. Another bad omen. I don’t like it. You know this village, Baran? They have rope? And fuel for the lanterns?”

Baran bristled at the mention of ‘another’ bad omen. Lorna had formerly been a chieftain of one of the free tribes that bordered Whitenorn’s northern edge, and was the only member of the senior Fireflies that Baran had known before this all began. When her peoples migrated south to assimilate into the walled towns and cities for safety, she had worried that her tribes might see her as weak for her actions, and so she joined the Fireflies. The mother-bear of a woman was



known to be superstitious, but she always put the chapter's wellbeing first. She saw every lantern-bearer as members of her new tribe, and her gut had gotten them out of trouble plenty of times before.

"I trust my scouts, Lorna. Lake Little is a flax farming village on the old logging road. Used to send their linen downriver with the log drivers. They ought to have everything we need, especially if the weather isn't an issue," he replied.

She grunted her assent, and returned to chewing on her knuckle.

With no more questions coming, Baran completed his report. Other than the Arcanum and the blizzard from the east, the plan was the same: make it to the Evergrove with as much of the caravan intact as possible, exchange the offerings, gather their lumber, and return home. Monster sightings in the region were at a level near enough to normal that they were all in agreement that it seemed likely they would succeed in bringing all five wagons home fully loaded, provided the offerings all survived the trip.

Kells broke the gathering with a loud clap and a short prayer, motioning on his way out that Lorna should join him for a quick errand before the caravan got underway. Sib also excused himself, mentioning something about tracking down Magnus, leaving Baran alone with the chapter's ruthlessly efficient Monster Hunter, River Payne.

Where Baran knew the land and the gods-given beasts which inhabited it, River could tell you anything you might ever want to know about anything men called a monster, especially the most effective ways to kill it. Now the one-armed death expert lingered behind, helping Baran to clean up by clearing the various tokens from the map and placing them back into the leather pouch they had originated from. Tall, lean, and quieter than an owl on the wing when they wanted to be, River was the one person in the chapter that Baran believed would always make it

back home from any expedition. He reckoned that he had never seen a weapon in their hand that looked like it didn't belong there, and the way they fought was like a dance; breathtaking to behold.

Moments of silence with River were rare, causing Baran to wonder what could possibly be keeping the chapter-gossip quite so quiet. He received the answer to that question before he could even ask, however, as River began to speak, chaining words together with a quickness which suggested they had been holding it in for some time.

“The dark woman is one of the Ashamso, from the Singing Isles. A fire speaker, too. That's why it's so warm when you stand near her. She joined us by waystone two days back. Kells had us wait for her, which is why we were nearly late. Her name is Hariko, and the three offerings she's brought are all magelings. They're scrawny, sure, but the locals are happy that they aren't giving up their own children...” they paused momentarily, “well, not as many of them, at least. Kells will surely tell you more, but I thought you might be curious. Are you hungry? I pinched a few of Lorna's eggy muffins this morning and we both know they're leagues better than that horse shit you call trail food.”

The pathfinder accepted the offer of pilfered baked goods while pondering the gravity of everything that had just been shared. He wondered at why it was now, after so many years, that someone from so far south would risk the journey. He had his own suspicions, but knew it would be best to speak with Kells before coming to any conclusions. The two hunters continued on their way toward the stables, chatting happily about meaningless things and warmer days while they walked.

There weren't enough daylight hours to justify dawdling more than absolutely necessary, and by the looks of things the caravan was ready to be underway. Kells and Val, now astride their

own mounts, were barking orders to the teamsters and any remaining stragglers. A low bellow from a signal horn echoed across the cobbles, followed by a creaking groan as the lead wagon lurched forward signaling that the journey had begun.

After clambering into the saddle of his own shaggy horse, Baran accepted the reins from an outstretched stableboy's hand. He found his thoughts lingering on the last of the three muffins that River had given him; its lightly seasoned, fluffy crust would be a welcome, if brief, respite from the unforgiving wilderness beyond the gates. Instead, he found his hand slipping into the pocket where it rested and, with as warm a smile as the grizzled woodsman could muster, he tossed it down to the boy who'd dressed his horse. With a firm pull on the reins, he wheeled about and set off at a trot to catch up with the lead wagon. As lead pathfinder, Baran and his scouts would be expected to ride ahead of the caravan for most of the day, and he hoped for a chance to speak with both Kells and Magnus before then.