

The Storm King

Chapter 12: The Mission

Roland stared at the prince for a moment, stunned. “The Northern Vales? What could the king possibly need there that he needs to send a paladin?”

August sighed, then took a sip of his drink. He looked Roland in the eyes before saying, “The king isn’t sending you. I am.”

This left Roland almost speechless. The prince certainly had the power to make a paladin, but the paladins only took orders from the king. The prince had no authority to give him any assignments, so why was he ordering Roland to go north?

“Your Highness, I…”

“I understand. You’re uncomfortable with this mission since it doesn’t come directly from my Royal Father. But let me ask you something, where is the king now?”

“He’s entered secluded training, leaving the kingdom in the hands of Your Highness and the Second Prince. I had thought there was some emergency when I received your summons, for the king to issue a mission to a paladin, and I came here in all haste. I even had to leave my squire behind.”

August looked out the windows for a moment, before looking back at Roland with a bitter smile. “The king isn’t in secluded training.”

There was a brief pause, while Roland rapidly thought through the possibilities. *‘Prince August seems a little reluctant to part with this information, so the king clearly isn’t ruling from behind the scenes. But if he isn’t training, then where is he? Is he retired in all but name? Is he allowing his sons to rule as co-regents to see who ought to be his successor?’*

August watched Roland’s face rapidly shift, from worried to contemplative, to slight anger, then back to worried. “There’s no need to speculate, my friend, I’ll tell you the truth. You do have a right to know, as a paladin. However, you must make a blood oath not to speak a word of this to anyone without my explicit approval.”

It didn’t take Roland long to agree. In fact, Prince August was surprised that he agreed so fast. He brought out a contract he’d had drawn up not too long ago and placed it before the paladin. Roland read the short contract, and satisfied that there were no hidden clauses, he drew a knife and made a small cut on his hand. He then dipped a nearby quill in his blood, wrote his name down on the paper, and wrapped his hand in a handkerchief that August passed to him.

“Good, I’ll have this taken to the priests at Lineage Hall. I’m glad you were able to trust me, Roland. Finding good men like you is quite difficult these days.” August rose from his seat at the table and walked over to his desk.

Roland rose as well, as it wouldn’t do for him to continue to sit while a member of royalty had risen.

August picked up a small bell and gave it a quick ring. The servant from before entered at the sound and bowed to the prince. August carefully folded the contract before placing it in a thin metal box. This box was sealed with August’s personal Mana Glyph, so he’d know if anyone opened it.

“Take this to my Eldest Brother at Lineage Hall. It is for his eyes only, on pain of being charged with treason.” The servant grew a little pale after hearing that and seeing the prince’s stern look, but accepted the box and made for the door. He gave one more bow, then left.

The prince took a deep breath, before returning to his seat. Roland joined him back at the table and waited for the prince to speak.

It took several moments, but August finally began. “My Royal Father went into secluded meditation to attempt to finish breaking into the eighth-tier.”

Roland didn’t speak a word, but he understood the king’s decision. Entering the eighth-tier was a long and complex process, involving greatly expanding the soul realm, so it’s no surprise that many mages choose to enter private long-term training to accomplish it.

The prince continued. “That was six years ago. I was barely fifteen, yet my Royal Father left the kingdom in the hands of myself and my Second Brother. This worked fine for a while, but an accident occurred about four years ago. The servant tasked with bringing my Royal Father his meals found him unconscious on the ground. He wasn’t able to be woken, and the healers were called.”

Roland listened with rapt attention. He hadn’t the faintest clue this had happened. He was also quite concerned, as it meant a great deal for the kingdom if the king died now when there was no clear heir.

“My Royal Father has been in that coma ever since. There have been no changes to his condition, but the Royal Physician has told me that every day he lingers in that coma, the chances of him waking lessen.” August’s face grew solemn, before quickly changing into anger. “Making the situation worse is my Second Brother all but abandoning the capital last year. Even now, he’s traveling all over the kingdom, supposedly placating the high lords and keeping the nobles in check, but I know better.”

This talk started making Roland very nervous. King Julius Taurus had six children, four of them sons, but only his second son was by his wife, the rest by concubines. The

eldest—a powerful sixth-tier mage in his sixties—had renounced the title of Crown Prince and ran off to join the priests in Lineage Hall. The Third Prince, a rather weak and timid man, more prone to burying himself in books and legends, also renounced his claim to the throne. This left the Fourth Prince, August, the thin and erudite man that he was, and the Second Prince, Octavius, a tall, muscular, handsome and energetic man who seemed every bit the heir to the Sacred Bull that August didn't.

But despite the Second Prince expecting to be named Crown Prince, King Julius never did clarify the issue. Then, when going into secluded training, he left the kingdom to be ruled by both the thirty-year-old Second Prince and the Fourth Prince, the then fifteen-year-old August. The Second Prince was left angry and humiliated. Many nobles had supported his claim and had spoken of their support for him publicly, but the king refused to name him Crown Prince, and made him share the position of regent with his younger brother! It would have been one thing if August had been the child of a noble concubine, but instead, he was the child of the king's favorite mistress, a woman of common birth.

Now, with the king indisposed, it made sense that August was feeling the pressure, and went so far as to name Roland, a commoner by birth but a longtime friend, as the Sixth Paladin of the Bull Kingdom. He needed to shore up his own power base, and find, or make, reliable allies.

August had paused here, waiting for Roland's response.

"Your Highness... This is an issue of monumental importance, but as a paladin, I'm sworn to no one but the king. I'm not too sure what your purpose is for sending me north. Are you trying to gain the support of our tribal allies? They couldn't even contribute a single legion's worth of warriors. They'd be cut down by our soldiers in no time flat."

"I'm not sending you north for warriors, though you will have to make contact with our tribal allies. No, what I'm sending you north for would hopefully avert civil war, rather than feed the fire.

"Not too long ago, I managed to persuade a healer from the court of the Sacred Golden Empress to come north and examine my Royal Father. He told me that the king suffered a backlash from trying to forcibly grow his soul realm, rather than letting it grow naturally. The chances are abysmally low for the king to wake on his own, but fortunately, the healer knows a potion that could heal him. The bad news is that he doesn't have all the ingredients.

"What I'm sending you north for is something called Heartwood Amber. Heartwood trees secrete a resin that hardens into amber over many millennia. Unfortunately, all the heartwood trees south of the frozen mountains are regularly harvested to build ships before they're old enough to produce the amber, making it prohibitively scarce. There

are still old heartwood trees in the Northern Vales, however, so I need you to find some of this amber.”

Roland still looked fairly conflicted. He didn’t expect his first mission would be in such a remote and uncivilized place. Maybe dealing with a rebellious lord, or hunting a troublesome monster, but not dealing with northern barbarians.

At least, he hoped it would only require dealing with a few barbarians. There are more than a few nightmarish stories about some of the less inhabited vales, stories about wraiths ripping souls out of people to use in profane rituals, creatures made of darkness that seep into a person’s body during the night and consume them from the inside, forest creatures that ensnare men with their otherworldly beauty, before turning them to stone, or worse. Roland wasn’t too keen on finding how accurate these stories were.

But, if what the prince had told him was true, then he was receiving an order from as close to royalty as he was going to see for a long time. So, he finally, reluctantly, gave his answer. “I’ll go, Your Highness. I’ll find this Heartwood Amber and bring it back to aid the king.”

August warmly smiled in relief. “Wonderful, wonderful.”

Roland opened his mouth to speak once more but seemed to think better of it, deciding to keep silent, but August noticed.

“What’s on your mind, my friend?”

“It’s... nothing. Forgive me, Your Highness, it isn’t my place to question orders. I’ve already been insolent enough by hesitating.”

“I give you permission to speak freely. No one else is here, only the two of us. Besides, who would dare to suggest that a paladin cannot ask a question of a prince, especially when receiving a mission? So fret not, all words spoken here are said in confidence.”

Roland seemed to struggle for another moment but eventually gave voice to what was on his mind. “I must ask Your Highness, why send me? There are five other paladins in the kingdom, all of whom would gladly undertake this mission for the well-being of the king.”

August’s smile turned bitter again. “The Penitent Paladin and Bronze Paladin don’t move unless personally ordered by the king. They already know of my Royal Father’s condition and have taken it upon themselves to guard his chambers. There’s no way they’ll ever accept a mission from me, no matter how necessary.

“The Sapphire Paladin grew up with my Second Brother, much like how you grew up with me. She would see me as a pretender to the throne and would never undertake a mission under my orders, let alone one that made her leave the kingdom.

"The Earthshaker Paladin is the younger brother of my Second Brother's mother. He won't listen to me, either.

"I've been making headway in bringing the Brimstone Paladin over to my side, but I doubt he'd go so far on my orders, especially as he's out exterminating a vampire nest right now.

"This leaves you. We've known each other for over ten years; you're as close a friend as I have. This is a well-known fact and I've caught no small amount of heat for appointing you to the position of paladin. The other five are all seventh-tier mages, but you are only of the sixth-tier. I know my Royal Father would never have approved of my decision to give you that title, not until you completed your mind palace, at least. I believe that accomplishing this task will not only bring me the Heartwood Amber I need to heal my Royal Father but will also prove definitively that you deserve your new position."

All this rather blew Roland away. He'd barely considered what the nobles might think of his appointment, as he'd thought he had the approval of the king. August waited for Roland's reaction and didn't have to wait long.

"Your Highness, I'll go and find that Heartwood Amber. I'll assemble a small team, and head north after acquiring provisions. I'll find the amber and return as soon as possible. I won't let you down."

August felt relief and joy. He knew he could count on his friend, but he had still felt some apprehension when calling Roland to the palace. He wasn't the king or the crown prince, so Roland was well within his rights to refuse.

But he didn't. His friend agreed.

The two stayed in the prince's office for another half hour, going over a few more logistical details and doing what they could to make Roland's journey north easier.

Eventually, Roland departed from the palace. On his way out, he saw his squire, a boy of nineteen. He'd been so worried at being given his first mission that he'd left his home without a moment's pause. The last order he gave to his servants was to inform his squire that he was heading towards the palace and to wait for him at the entrance.

And sure enough, there he was. This boy was of average height, with neutral brown hair, and average build. Looking at him on the street, Roland would have described him as being 'the embodiment of average in appearance'. His naturally fair skin tone had darkened considerably from the amount of time he had to spend outdoors when training, and almost matched his leather armor.

But he was a solid fighter. Roland had been assigned him almost a year ago—from before he had been made a paladin—and had come to know just how skilled this boy was with a sword from encounters with bandits, smugglers, and wandering monsters.

Roland stepped out of the palace's door, walked out of the peristyle, and waved to the squire. "Luke! I'm glad they let you past the gate on the bridge."

"They almost didn't, Sir. I had to show them all of my identification papers before they allowed me to enter the island. I still had to wait for you here, though, they wouldn't let me come find you in the palace." Luke gestured at the royal guards by the palace doors.

Roland shrugged. "That's understandable, but I hope you haven't been waiting too long."

"No, Sir. I just got here about fifteen minutes ago. Is it time to leave?"

"It is indeed."

"Then I shall fetch the horses."

Roland smiled. Luke was a diligent squire, and if a two-year squireship wasn't required to graduate from the Knight Academy, then he would have already knighted the boy.

It didn't take long for Luke to return with two horses. One was the stallion that Roland had ridden in on, a magnificent courser with a deep black coat. Luke had to make due with a cheaper, less impressive horse, a small mare with a significantly less shiny brown coat. The stallion was lean and muscular, but the mare just looked rather thin and didn't respond to Luke's hold nearly as quickly as the stallion did for Roland.

The two men climbed onto their horses and began riding towards the bridge, with Roland taking a slight lead. They rode away with neither speaking a word.

After a few moments, after they had put some distance between them and the palace, Roland finally broke the silence. "Best get some good rest tonight, Luke. We have a long couple of months ahead of us."