

The Storm King

Chapter 13: The Team

“What sort of mission have we received, Sir?” asked Luke.

“We’re going north, past the Frozen Mountains, and into the Northern Vales. We are looking for an alchemical ingredient called ‘Heartwood Amber’.”

Luke frowned. He had a casual hobby of alchemy but had never heard of Heartwood Amber before.

Roland continued, “We’re also going to need a small team. Maybe four or five, plus their men-at-arms. I already have a few in mind, we’ll go over it when we get back to my place.”

It took them half an hour to get back to Roland’s villa. It had a similar aesthetic to the royal palace, as did most other villas in the area, all white stone, red roof tiles, marble floors, and granite columns, and was built on a large estate of about four acres. The place was also quite magically advanced, with enchantments regulating temperature, even in the open-air sections of the villa, and enchantments that lock doors, purify water, preserve food, maintain the gardens, and even enchantments that repelled the rain and brought running water to the villa.

Roland and Luke rode in through the gate into the entrance garden. There was a small stable off to the side, with space for four horses. Roland left Luke to unsaddle the horses and walked inside to greet his wife.

Melissa was a common-born girl, of slightly less than average height, light brown hair, and warm, gentle features. She was certainly a beauty, but of a more cute and earthly quality than more dazzling and gorgeous highborn ladies, who often invested heavily in magic that preserved or amplified their beauty.

When Roland walked in, she was giving orders to the servants who maintained the villa and operated her side business. Roland was quite well-paid as a paladin, and as a knight before that, so she’d taken some of that money to start a small masonry business, cutting and polishing some of the white stone that the nobles of the kingdom seemed to build everything out of. Next to her was a middle-aged woman holding an infant boy.

She turned to see who had walked in and saw her husband in his bright formal suit. She’d had a stern, stoic business face on before, but that broke into a warm and loving smile. Roland walked over and gave her a gentle hug, making sure not to

squeeze too hard; she was only a second-tier mage and he was of the sixth-tier. He then smiled down at his son in the arms of the servant.

Melissa gave her husband an inquisitive look, wordlessly asking what had been asked of him at the palace, but he just gave her a kiss and told her that they would talk about it later, and for now, he would be in his study with Luke and a few others.

So, Roland settled into his study, with ink and paper, making a list of essential supplies and starting to map out the route to take. When Luke returned, the squire diligently began making a list of needed provisions, and the two started discussing who to bring on the journey north. Paladins always had a good number of subordinate knights and men-at-arms assigned to them as personal retainers, and there were a few in Roland's service that he wanted on this mission.

Soon, couriers departed, summoning those he had chosen to his villa.

The first to arrive was Sir Andrew Clement. He was a great bear of a man, easily six and a half feet of solid muscle. His long dark brown beard barely fit under a helmet, though he rarely bothered with one, preferring instead to armor himself in light leather so he wouldn't be weighed down while wielding his heavy double-bladed battle-ax.

Then, there was Dame Sheira Evensen. She too was quite tall, pushing six feet, but far leaner than Sir Andrew. She had fine, noble features, long blonde hair, and piercing blue eyes. She had a calm temperament and was an artist with a cavalry lance.

The last person invited was Sir Roger Stanley. He was fearless, almost to the point of recklessness. Roland had seen him charge into a werewolf nest without armor, wielding only a morningstar. He was a thin and wiry man with short red hair and a fair amount of unshaven stubble.

These three were the knights that Roland had decided on having with him as he went north. All three were fifth-tier mages and battle-hardened warriors. What's more, they had all been serving as his subordinate knights for several years now, and their loyalties were without question.

Naturally, they were curious as to why they had been summoned to meet Roland so quickly, as meetings would usually be scheduled days in advance, but Roland wouldn't say until everyone was present.

When Roger finally arrived, Roland clapped his hands and got down to business. "I have been tasked with a mission that concerns the fate of the kingdom. I must go north in search of a material called Heartwood Amber, and I have decided that you all shall accompany me.

"We'll be going north via the Julian Road, all the way to Clear Ice Fortress. It should take about two weeks to go that far, so we'll stop off for a few days rest at the fortress,

then continue north past the Frozen Mountains. We'll make contact with the chief of the locals, the Brown Bear Tribe, and proceed from there. If all goes well, we'll be back in the capital within two months.

"Any questions?" Roland looked at each the knights in turn. Roger simply smiled in anticipation. He had no qualms about going to the less civilized parts of the world. Sheira, too, didn't question Roland's plan. They had been with Roland through thick and thin and would follow him wherever they were needed. Only Andrew spoke up.

"Sir, wouldn't it be easier to simply ask the Heaven's Eye Merchant Guild? I'm sure they would be able to find some of this Heartwood Amber without us risking our lives that far from home."

Heaven's Eye Merchant Guild was a multinational financial organization from the central empires. It specialized in all things gold, from trade to banking. It was so trusted, in fact, that it handled the banking needs of just about every state in Aeterna. They almost completely controlled the entire plane's economy. But in return, they had made many blood oaths that they would separate themselves from politics and never take sides in national conflicts, whether internal or external. This wasn't always feasible, especially in civil wars, but the Guild was the single most trusted organization in existence, and it had earned that trust.

"His Highness Prince August has already met with their representatives. They indicated that it would be several years before any amber might become available, and even then, it might clear out a huge chunk of the kingdom's reserves."

Andrew was almost dumbstruck. "It's *that* expensive? How the hell would we even find some, then?"

"That very question is why a paladin has been dispatched, rather than sending diplomats to recruit the tribesmen, or sending a foraging party."

While Andrew sat there, attempting to process just how valuable Heartwood Amber was, Sheira finally decided to ask something. "Sir, I get the idea that this mission is somewhat time sensitive?"

"You're not wrong. The sooner we can accomplish this task, the better."

"Why then are we taking the Julian Road? If we take a barge up the Naga River, we'd be at the Duchy of Morena, and from there it would only be a quick journey through the Grandison March, and we'd be at the Clear Ice Fortress. It could cut days off the travel time."

Roland made a bitter expression. "We're not going that way. We'll stay within the Royal Demesne as much as possible. Nobles don't take kindly to me, a common-born

knight, being named as the sixth paladin. A *sixth-tier* common-born knight. The Duke and Marquis would undoubtedly get in our way.”

Since his talk with the prince, Roland understood that the higher nobles didn’t take too kindly to his appointment, so he wanted to avoid entering their lands as much as possible. Fortunately, over forty percent of the kingdom was ruled directly by the royal family or an appointed governor, so it was easy enough for him to get to where he needed to go.

“There is one more thing. We are the only knights who will be going. I want you to pick three men-at-arms each. Your own squires can come as well. We’ll be traveling light, and we’ll have to leave our horses at Clear Ice, so no heavy armor.”

The knights all nodded, though with some trepidation. It was true that passing the Frozen Mountains with horses would be almost impossible due to the roughness of the terrain, but it was still hard to hear. Roland and his knights had made their names in a heavy cavalry unit, and their horses were symbols of their status.

But they still knew that as much as they might want to, the horses couldn’t come with.

So, the five continued to talk for another hour, hammering out the details of the mission, where they would go, the specifics of the route, the supplies they would bring, and who they would speak to. When they were finished, the three knights left to make their preparations.

Luke wasn’t too far behind, as he too had to make arrangements for himself and Roland.

When Roland left the study, he made for the meeting room off the entrance hall. Melissa was there, sitting at a large table covered in papers. She was examining one of them, quill in hand, pretty face scrunched up into her ‘concentrating face’.

The servants at her side bowed once they noticed he had come in. Melissa then looked up, and her face brightened into a dazzling smile when she saw him. Roland nodded to his servants, and they bowed once more before exiting the room.

Roland crossed the hall and took his wife into his arms. She was bit surprised but lovingly returned the hug. They stayed that way for several minutes, neither quite willing to separate from the other.

But, finally, Roland had to say something, so he moved his head to whisper into Melissa’s ear. “I have to go away for a while. A few months at the least. I’m going to have to leave tomorrow.”

Her face was buried in his chest, but he felt her tremble, before looking up into his eyes. “This is what you were called to the palace for? The King wants to take my

husband from my arms and send him off to ancestors knows where.” Her radiant smile was still there, but it had faltered somewhat. She removed herself from Roland’s arms after a sigh of dejection. “Gracchus!” she shouted.

An elderly man came in from another room, wearing a plain gray robe, and what little hair remained on his head was cut short. He was almost seventy years old, and he was only a first-tier mage, so his lifespan was no longer than a regular mortal. He was an accountant, hired by Roland to assist his wife and her other employees in keeping the books at her business.

He bowed as he came in, first to Roland, then again to Melissa. “How may I assist you, my lady?”

Melissa waved her hand at the table. “Go over these documents. They all should pertain to transportation permits and import taxes, but you can brief me on them tomorrow regardless.” She then gave Roland a sultry look and started walking further into the villa. Roland, of course, followed, and Gracchus bowed as they left the room.

Once through the door to their bedroom, Melissa threw herself at her husband. It took them a while to undress, as their lips almost seemed glued together, but eventually, they made it to the large bed, leaving their clothing in small piles on the way.

Melissa had jumped into Roland’s arms, and he carried her the last few steps before throwing her down onto the bed. He lowered himself over her, going for one last kiss before continuing, but she wrapped her legs around his waist, preventing him from moving. Roland gave her a look that was both surprised and aroused, and she twisted her hips, throwing him down beside her. She quickly pushed herself up, getting on top of him.

She sat on his waist completely without any shame, letting her husband see and touch everything. She brought her face closer to his, and he moved to kiss her again. She stopped him by placing her finger on his lips and pushed his head back down while giving him an impish smile. She brought her lips in close to his ear, whispering, “When you leave tomorrow, you are the Bull Kingdom’s Sixth Paladin, but until then, you’re mine.”