Chapter 88 (Arc 2 Chapter 42)

As Pomare Torrent announced that I had gifted the mithril shirt to him, he held it up to show the small crowd. He continued to talk, and when I thought he no longer needed me to stand next to him, I moved to join Gareth and Loriel, who had obviously been waiting for my return. Pomare stuttered as I left his side but soon continued with his pronouncements from the small dais.

I collapsed on the sofa beside Gareth, who said, “Storme, how are you doing? They paralyzed me with frigging magic to stop me from saying or doing anything to help you.” He turned and gave a withering look at Loriel.

Loriel said with grating words, “You would have ended up in the dungeons if you had interfered, Gareth.”

I supported her, “She is right, Gareth. Loriel did you a favor. It didn’t turn out too poorly in the end.” Then I thought to needle Gareth, “I just have the entire Bricio family wanting my head. I had to gift a fortune to the Torrent family for their protection. And lastly, all the nobles in Skyholme know who I am.” Gareth shrank slightly, but I doubted it would phase him long.

Pomare had finished talking, and Tessa came and sat with us. A number of nobles walked by, giving me their congratulations, not that I would remember a single one of them. When the parade stopped, Gareth spoke, “I don’t think I could have bested him, Storme.”

I laughed, “I wasn’t supposed to best him either, Gareth. They set me up to lose against a ranged attacker without any ranged weapons. Thankfully my *aether shield* spell was evolved enough to handle his onslaught.” A few lingering nobles were still around, so I revealed as little information as possible. My healing spell and *thermostatic aura* spell also played a huge role in winning the fight. Without my thermostatic aura spell, I probably would have suffered incapacitating lung damage. During the fight, the spell leveled and evolved each time to increase the temperature range. Now at level eight, the spell had a range of 24” and could handle shifting temperatures in a range of 400 degrees.

Examining my spell matrix on the comfortable couch, I had also made other gains in the forty-minute fight. *Lesser restoration* had reached level nine, and my *alarm* spell had made it to level eighteen.

I was still distracted when Loriel spoke cautiously, “Do you wish for a ride back to Titan’s Shield on my skyship?”

I considered for a moment. With these events, I had been tied to the Torrent family, so being seen with Loriel no longer seemed as big of a deal. “I would appreciate that, Loriel. The quicker I can leave the capital, the better.” I stood, and my clothes cracked from being charred.

We all moved out of the large room, eyes following us. Tessa walked beside me as we followed two Blackguards to the private skyship docks in the Citadel. Tessa, who had been mostly quiet, said, “My mother will replace your clothes, Storme.”

I looked down. It had been a nice outfit but was now completely ruined. My *cleanliness* spell had removed much of the ash and soot, but it was damaged beyond repair. “It is fine. I prefer not to owe anyone favors.”

Tessa choked, “Favors? I don’t think I will ever be able to repay what you did for me today. The scales are so skewed in your favor right now. I had thought you were going to ask for my hand.” I saw her blush bright red at her admission.

I ignored the suggestion, “How long before Aeyln is freed?” I asked. Tessa quickly regained herself, sensing I was not going to inquire about joining her.

“I don’t know. My guess is Pomare will order the mage who cast it to break the mark, and it should disappear then,” she quickly replied. She added, “The Wolfguard should happen fairly quickly as well. There is usually a ceremony where the Wolfguard accepts your scent and is bonded to you. I have read about it. The Wolfguard are raised from birth in seclusion by the Blackguard. They are only exposed to their bonded when it is time to bond.”

Our escorts brought us to an array of platforms with small skyships. Loriel took the lead, and we approached a small boxy ship. We walked up the ramp, and I recognized a young woman who flew into me and gave me a hug. “Leda, it is good to see you too. But isn’t a hug a little too informal?”

She punched me in the shoulder hard, “We heard out here the Bricios had tricked a young man into an honor duel. Cilia thought it was Gareth for sure.”

“So did you!” Cilia said from inside a cabin, and she emerged to join us on the deck.

“Yeah, so we both thought it was Gareth. We tried to sneak down and watch, but the Blackguard wouldn’t let us leave the docks. We learned from the departing nobles’ gossip that Bricios had lost but cooked the offender in magical fire.” Leda patted my roasted wardrobe.

“Well, you should know that I am an excellent chef and rarely overcook things,” I said with a tired grin.

Tessa pulled my arm to bring my attention to her, “I am heading back to my academy.” I faced her, and she pulled my head down into a surprise kiss. I regretted not getting more practice kissing as I fumbled about and wasn’t sure if I should use my tongue or not. I came off as extremely inexperienced. Thankfully Tessa didn’t seem to mind my awkwardness and smiled. “Maybe next time we go on a date, it could be just the two of us?”

Before I could answer, she was retreating down the ramp. I think she didn’t want to give me a chance to reject her offer to meet again. I looked up to find a grinning Gareth and Leda. Cilia rolled her eyes and moved up to the top deck for departure. Loriel was just studying me. Gareth finally said, “It was that good of a kiss, huh? Is that grin permanent?” I suddenly realized I was still smiling and had my face go neutral.

For some reason, I was embarrassed. “I am going to learn how to fly a skyship from Cilia,” I said, leaving them.

Loriel’s skyship was extremely basic. Cilia showed me how the controls worked and how to use the navigational pedestal next to the controls. The navigation was tied to the massive aether ley lines that ran through the crust of the Sphere. These ley lines also housed the myriad of dungeons within the Sphere.

This skyship was not meant for speed. It was a medium transport that was converted into a luxury liner. The lower decks had fancy cabins. Cilia told me that Loriel was pragmatic in selecting the ship. If she had purchased a ship that might have been useful to the navy, it could have been confiscated during a prolonged conflict. So she got a sturdy ship and renovated it for comfort.

I wanted to say comfort should have been a secondary concern, but I held my tongue. When I built my own skyship, I planned to make sure it was fast and had some offensive capability. In the Sphere you didn’t just need to worry about other skyships. There were drakes, griffins, rocs, giant eagles, air elementals, storm elementals, and numerous other enemies in the skies.

We landed on the Hen’s Hollow platform, a guard rushed up to meet us. Since Loriel was in the succession line for the Miaden family, she didn’t have to pay the fee, and the guard left dejected. Gareth and I got hugs from Leda and Cilia before heading to our room in the barracks.

I was too mentally exhausted to head to the *Shiny Platinum* and do a dungeon run. Gareth still went, and I spent most of the day sleeping. I tossed and turned in my slumber with anxiety and even woke to recast my *alarm* spells and *arcane locks*. I wasn’t sure if my paranoia was healthy or not.

I was now steeped in Skyholme politics. I hoped Pomare Torrent kept his word and diverted attention to himself and away from me. When Gareth returned late that night I was still exhausted even though I had slept most of the day. Gareth did give me fantastic news. Lana had imprinted the *dimensional closet* spell. Gareth handed me the spellbook back, and I put it in my dimensional space.

Remy told Gareth she had been studying the spell every waking hour to imprint it. Not so she could join the delves but so she could start studying the illusion spells. I was ok with that, and now I wouldn’t feel pressure to go on every dungeon delve to carry the loot. I planned to give Lana even more illusion spells in the future so she could maximize her illusion skill affinity.

After four days of academy training, I hadn’t heard anything about my assigned Wolfguard, Bleiz, or Aelyn’s release.  I wasn’t surprised by the possible betrayal; I just focused on my classes and remained alert. The Bricios would eventually seek revenge, and I sent a warning to the crew at the *Shiny Platinum* but hoped the Bricios would see Callem’s and Wynna’s name on the title and leave it alone.

Pomare might have played me, as I hadn’t even received a message after five days.  Hopefully, the dungeon essences in my dimensional space were real.  I planned to bring them to Wynna and Ennet to evaluate before using them.  Comically, I did receive dozens of outfits from noble admirers in the capital.  I just kept throwing them into my dimensional space and would eventually donate them to an orphanage.  Well, most of them.  There were a few pieces that I liked.

I was settling into my bed after helping the twins with their magic on the night of the 5th day.  Earlier in the day, I had imprinted the *absolute time* spell and was working on setting up the spell in my aether core.  The spell was essentially a perfect mental watch.  The first evolution had a day tracker, the second evolution had a date tracker, and the third was a stopwatch.  The spell was sitting at level three, and I was recasting it, trying to level it further to evolve more, when the door burst open, and Aelyn rushed in.

I jumped up on alert and activated my *lightning reflexes* spell, ready for trouble. I dodged Aelyn rushing me, going into the overdrive mode of the spell.  Aelyn crashed into my bed where I had been as I moved to the door to look for the threat.  Gareth would be practicing at Twin Rocks, so there is no point in calling for his aid.  Aelyn untangled herself from the sheets in disbelief that I had evaded her.  I faced her and finally noticed her tattoo was gone.  I asked, “Are you?”

She nodded emphatically, and this time, I didn’t dodge her as she rushed me.  We hugged, and Aelyn started to cry. She was racked with sobs which brought the twins from across the hallway.  The emotional release took a good half an hour, and then I took the twins and Aelyn into the kitchen to make a celebratory cake.  I hadn’t told Aelyn I had negotiated her release for fear it wasn’t going to happen.  However, Gareth had spilled the beans the day after we returned, and the last few days had been torture for Aelyn. I was somewhat angry at Gareth because I had thought he had gotten Aelyn’s hopes up for nothing. Now everything was resolved.

After I got the chocolate cake batter into the oven, I turned to Aelyn, “It is with great happiness that I return this ring of our union to you.”  I pulled off the master’s ring and handed it to Aelyn.  Her face contorted in uncertainty.  I had only used my control of Aelyn a half dozen times on Aelyn in the last year.  All those times were incidental from poorly articulated phrases.  Since I wore the ring, they were considered commands. The most humorous of these incidents was when I told her to needed to bathe, and she jumped in the river.

“I don’t…do you want to keep…”  I took the ring and melted it into a blob.  The tiny aether crystals poked out of the mass, destroying the enchantments.  Aelyn looked at the puddle and nodded.  I wanted her to close this chapter of her life, not keep mementos. Aelyn had been living a normal life, just contained to Skyholme.

The twins tried to lighten the mood by asking what Aelyn planned to do now.  I let them talk as I whipped up some buttercream frosting—vanilla, butter, powdered sugar, and a few splashes of heavy cream.  I whipped the mixture and tuned in to the conversation.  Aelyn asked me, “Can I remain in Skyholme?” I started laughing, and then she joined in after realizing what she had done.

“Aelyn, you don’t need to ask for permission to do anything.  You can stay or return to the lowlands,” I said energetically.

Aelyn gathered herself and said, “Then I plan to stay on the dungeon delve team,” she smiled, “But I want to negotiate a raise.”

Gareth chose at this time to enter the kitchen, returning from his additional training with the masters.  “Are you all having a party without me?” He said jokingly but immediately pointed at Aelyn, noticing she was no longer marked.  “Told you Storme would do it!” I had been upset with Gareth for revealing my terms with Pomare because I knew there had always been a chance he would back out of the agreement.

Gareth joined the celebration by giving Aelyn a hug which she returned. I think that was the first time Aelyn had let Gareth get that close to her.  I used my *thermostatic aura* to cool the cake rapidly when it came out of the oven and covered it in the buttercream.  Gareth ate half the cake himself to the protests of everyone present. I could tell Aelyn wanted to say more in private, so when everyone moved to their rooms, I stayed behind with her.

“Storme,” she started, got her courage, “I still feel like I owe you. If there is anything you require of me, just ask.” I just nodded but was thinking of the similarities of Tessa and Aelyn’s debt to me.

“Aelyn, you need time to realize you are free. When we travel to Aegis City, you can consult Gimble. You will probably need to register as a non-Skyholme resident as he did,” I advised, and she nodded.

Aelyn came in for another hug which I returned and whispered, “I still won’t read your thoughts without your permission.” Aelyn left, and I also set my defenses before going to sleep.

We were on the obstacle course in the morning with a happy Aelyn running all the courses with us in series.  I think Gareth even let her win on purpose.  The mood was high when our entire class finished, even though everyone was filthy and sweaty.  I, of course, walked away, cleaning myself with my spell.  Someone pointed to the sky, and we followed the finger to see a black Harbinger warship coming to land at the sky dock next to the barracks academy.  The large warship was going to take up the entire platform.

Mia was nearby and said, “That is the Blackguard ship, *Absolution*.  It is the only ship in the fleet that is completely painted black and controlled by the Citadel’s Wolfguard.”  I was a little surprised she knew that, but I now had an inkling of why the ship was here.  My thoughts were confirmed when two Wolfguard came down to the yard and talked to Callem.  Callem called me over.

“Storme, this is Balken and Logan.  They are captains in the Blackguard.  They are here for your bonding ceremony to the Torrent Wolfguard Bleiz,” Callem said neutrally.  He knew this was going to happen but I couldn’t tell if he approved.

I walked with the two Wolfguard to the skyship platform and boarded the ship.  There were a number of Blackguard on the ship, and I felt like I was under a microscope as they examined me as I was led below deck.  I wish I had been told a little more about my role in this ceremony.  I asked Balken, “What do I need to do?”

The black-haired but graying Wolfguard looked at me with hard blue eyes, “You will go into the sauna and add your urine, blood, and sweat to this vial in equal portions.”  He handed me a vial and a small knife.  “When you are done, you will come and sit across from Bleiz on the pillow.  The Blackguard Saint will handle everything from there.”

I was walked into a dark cargo hold in the lower decks and shown a door.  Beyond the door were stones that were glowing red, the only light.  A bucket and ladle were nearby.  I added water to the stones while I was shut into the dark room.  It didn’t take long to get a good sweat going. I scraped my skin until the vial was a third full, then carefully added urine to make it two-thirds full, and finally, I pricked and dripped blood to fill the vial.

I emerged with my success in my hand, and Balken took the vial and knife and led me to another room. Inside was a dozen Blackguard in uniforms lining the wall. Three large pads were on the floor. Two were occupied with Wolfguard. One had a young male with corded muscle, and brilliant green eyes that studied me as I came and sat opposite him. To my right, on the remaining mat, had an old and nearly completely white-furred elder.

The elder took the vial and began to turn it in her had mixing my fluids. The elder brought out a bowl with a white powder. She slowly poured my fluids into the bronze bowl. The white powder absorbed my fluids and turned black. The elder, or Saint as Balken had called her, spoke, “The markers of those you are sworn to protect, serve and die for if required,” she held out the bowl offering it to Bleiz, “Do you, Bleiz, sworn of the Torrent, accept these markers and your charge, Strome Hardlight?”

The green eyes of the male wolfkin studied me but didn’t move to take the bowl. His dark gray, almost black fur rippled, showing his muscles underneath. The Saint repeated, “Do you, Bleiz, sworn of the Torrent, accept these markers and your charge, Strome Hardlight?”

I studied Bleiz’s green eyes and could see a struggle in them. I asked a question, “Why do you hesitate?” The Saint looked at me and then back at Bleiz.

The elder nodded at Bleiz, “You may answer your future master’s question.”

While maintaining eye contact, Bleiz told me, “We were told ever since we were a pup and could understand speech that the harder we worked, the higher the status the person we would be bonded to would be. And now I am being bonded to a boy, not even of the Three.” He turned coldly to the Saint, “I am the strongest of my wolfpack. I earned the right to be paired with someone equally worthy.”

The Saint raised her eyebrows in what I guessed was humor, “You have no rights.”

“Then I wish to be Blackguard, the unaffiliated. Instead of being bonded to this boy,” he said with some anger.

I turned to the Saint and asked, “I am sorry, but I do not understand the bonding process. Can you explain?”

The Saint looked at me and nodded while Bleiz continued to stare, “The powder in this bowl is given to the Wolfguard from an early age. It is a loyalty power but has no markers. Over time it saturates the body, waiting for the markers. This ceremony adds the bonded markers or blood, sweat, and urine to the powder so when the Wolfguard inhales the powder it permeates their body and forms the bond.”

I was feeling a bit uncomfortable now. This was slavery in its highest form. “Can we forgo the bonding ritual and just leave?” The twelve Blackguard along the walls tensed.

The Sain shook her head, no, “They are here to make sure the ritual proceeds. Any failure in the process will result in Bleiz’s execution.” She added, “Two years ago, someone tried to slip their sweat into the powder of a wolfpack being trained. At the first bonding ceremony, the Wolfguard rejected the bonded and was killed.” The Saint asked me, “Do you know why it took many days for this ceremony to happen?”

“No, as Bleiz said, I am not of the Three,” I said.

“The Bricios lost four Wolfguard to an accident and tried to claim Bleiz. He was already marked for you by Pomare. Then someone invaded the training yards and attempted to bond the entire class to themselves. We discovered the plot and killed the man. Otieno Bricio claimed the entire class was possibly tainted and was to be put down as had been down in the past.” My blood chilled. Was this a form of revenge for the Bricios? Kill 23 Wolfguard just so no one could bond Bleiz?

The Saint nodded as she saw I grasped the meaning behind her words. I turned to Bleiz, “What would make me worthy of bonding with you?”

His green eyes narrowed, considering, “If you can strike me in combat once, I will take on your markers.” Well, he was cocky, for sure, based on his smile when I nodded and stood.

I asked the Saint, “Since you are neutral will you reveal anything you see me do today?”

“What happens at bonding is never spoken of outside of the bonding,” she nodded, but I could see her smile slightly as well.

Bleiz spoke, “If you fail to strike me before I strike you five times, I want to be raised to the Blackguard instead.”

I said without hesitation, “Agreed.” Bleiz waited till the Saint nodded as well at the terms of the duel. How was I getting into so many duels lately?

Balken came and gave each of us a knife. The blade was well made and had six-inch edge. I turned it over in my hands, exploring it with my metal senses. I then turned on Bleiz and used my assess person ability on him.

*Bleiz*

*Male Human-Wolfkin Half Breed*

*Age 17*

*Disposition: Hatred*

He stood maybe an inch shorter than myself, so 6’1”. His dark-furred frame rippled with lean muscle. I took no chances and immediately put my lightning relfexes into overdrive mode. When the Saint said, “Begin,” Bleiz flashed toward me.

He was extremely fast, but I was moving at 2.6 times my natural speed. I dodged the quick thrust and parried his slash, and stepped back. Bleiz was not the only one stunned in the cargo hold. The surrounding Blackguard shifted uneasily. Bleiz had been planning to get two strikes in and probably gloat. Now he had no strikes and was shown to be the slower of the two of us.

“Are you human?” He asked with some disbelief in his tone.

“Yes,” was all I said as I lunged at him. He was on the defensive immediately and even managed to evade my first two attempts to cut him. My third and fourth caught him on the thigh and bicep. I pulled away, and the Saint held up her hand for Bleiz to stop.

Two cuts in his fur were bleeding fine lines. I used my assess person skill again.

*Bleiz*

*Male Human-Wolfkin Half Breed*

*Age 17*

*Disposition: Respect*

I walked casually up to Bleiz and healed the wounds. “Bleiz, just know that you will always be free to voice your mind in my employ. I see the bond going both ways. You protect my back, and I will protect yours. Hopefully, our bond will be built on mutual trust and friendship in time.”

He still seemed uncertain, but soon the cushions were returned, and the ritual proceeded. The bowl was handed to Bleiz and tapped with a brass scepter. The powder formed a cloud in the bowl. Looking at me one last time, Bleiz inhaled the cloud in the bowl to his face. As he started to inhale, the cloud seemed to rush into his nostrils.

I waited a few moments before using my ability again.

*Bleiz*

*Male Human-Wolfkin Half Breed*

*Age 17*

*Disposition: Devoted*

I still felt slightly dirty about doing this, but the alternative was that the families would use Bleiz as a pawn. The Saint stood and hovered over Bleiz for a moment and then turned to the room, “The bonding was a success.” I felt the tension leave the Blackguard along the wall. I guessed there had been more than a few failed bondings. She turned to me, “You may leave with Bleiz.”

I held up my hand to pause, and asked Bleiz, “You have aether and can use artificed items?”

He nodded, “I have been trained in their use but have none of my own.”

“Then you will be able to use these items.” I produced the invisibility necklace and the long sword from Baladon. The necklace required a tiny flow of aether to work. You are to remain invisible and meet me outside the barracks in the evening. I do not want anyone to see you leave the *Absolution*. He nodded and put on the necklace and disappeared.

I bowed to the Saint in respect and left myself to return to my academy classes after using my *cleanliness* spell to freshen myself. When I returned to spellcraft, I started imprinting my next spell *aether fortress* with Selina’s help. My mind drifted, and I actually had to admire Pomare. He had held up his end of the bargain, Aelyn was free, and I now had another ally in the shadows. If I was correct from the notes, then Bleiz had been being trained as an assassin. I guess the Bricios would have killed off enough of their own personnel Wolfguard to add Bleiz to their rosters. Just another plan of the Bricios I had mucked up.