Chapter 115 Every Wizard Needs a Wizard Tower

The Maelstrom was crowded as we headed to the capital island.  I left the cats with food and water in my room at the Shiny Platinum.  I was on the bridge with Cilia, Leda, and Freya.  Everyone else was in the cargo hold for the trip.  “When are you taking me to the lowlands?” Freya whined, somewhat teasingly.  She was wearing a new formal blue dress and staring out the viewing window as we passed over the edge of the island.

Leda smirked at my sister.  It wasn’t his first time on the Maelstrom, but was her first time going to another island on the ship.  Now, she already wanted to go all the way to the lowlands.

“After your fourteenth,” I said without preamble.

“You fourteenth is not for another week, and you have been to the lowlands many times,” she argued.

“Fine, you can go to the lowlands with you own your own skyship,” I countered her argument.

Freya came back with, “Since I work for you, it is kind of like I have part ownership in the Maelstrom.”  Cilia was already laughing, and Leda turned away at my sister’s logic.

“No Freya.  Not even close,” I muttered.  I needed to put the reigns on her before she became like Gareth.  “Freya, how is your weapons training going with Mia?”

“Ok.  It is tough.  Bleiz was harder on me, but I think I learned faster,” she gripped.  “He is coming back in two weeks?”

“Yes.  I am making another trade mission to Llorth and will pick him up,”  I confirmed.  The island was already approaching. Cilia took a practiced loop to bring the Maelstrom into the Skyhold Citadel docks.  Five Harbinger ships were in the skies around the docks as a show of force and in case something happened.  Another ship came into view, and I chuckled as Loriel’s ship was floating above the Citadel.  She must have made her grand entrance on it as it was docked on the ballroom platform.

The Maelstrom glided toward a very crowded docking area.  These were the private docks for the Trivumverate, but there were dozens of unfamiliar ships here.  Some must be Skyholme nobles, but the rest were from the lowlands, and not just from the Sadian Empire by the variety.  Dozens of Skyholme Navy men and women stood in pairs around the docks.  Most were extremely young and just here as decoration from the Academy.

Freya blurted, “We have a surprise for you in the hold! I was to keep you up here until it was ready. It should be ready!” She started dragging me to the stairs. I descended to see everyone standing around a mannequin.

The mannequin was dressed in a luxurious outfit. Black pants with some dark silver stripes. An off-white silk shirt with platinum buttons. The belt was black as well and skillfully engraved with a platinum buckle. There was a loop for a scabbard on the right hip. The long jacket was black as well, with an angular cut and large lapels. I walked around to find a dark purple cape on the back with the emblem of the Shiny Platinum in silver. I touched the fabric and could feel the weave of multiple enchantments in the outfit. It must have cost hundreds of gold.

A glowing Gareth spoke, “I knew your tastes the best, so I designed it. But everyone contributed to purchasing it.”

Mother interrupted Gareth, “We planned to present it to you on your Fourteenth but had the rest of the work rushed for this event.”

I had been wearing a stylish dark blue and black suit. It was expensive, costing me twenty gold, but nothing like this masterpiece. Gareth did know my tastes as we had discussed them. This suit was a cross between a tuxedo and formal Navy dress. “It is marvelous,” I said to the people gathered around me. I thanked each person individually, even if they probably had not played a role in obtaining the suit.

The skyship landed, and I was left on board to change into the new suit. When I exited the ramp I found Bylura next to Gareth. She was dressed in formal wear with Miadeon colors. She addressed me, “Storme, the others have made their way inside. You and Gareth will have to wait until the next round of arrival announcement for honored guests. You can follow me.”

I walked beside Gareth and said, “I have not seen you awhile. Have you been staying at your room in the Academy?”

“Yes. Since I do not need to sleep too much, I joined some extracurricular clubs that practice after school,” he said without much emotion.

“Oh, which ones? How is that working with Fera?” I asked, trying to draw him out.

“Fera and I are no longer a couple of Storme. Have you not been paying attention? Are you still living in your little world?” his tone was neutral but sounded slightly accusatory.

“Oh, I am sorry to hear that.” We were being led down a long hallway, and a Naval captain passed us. I asked Gareth, “Has Callem talked to you recently?”

Gareth nodded, eyes straight ahead. “He did. He asked me to come out and help teach the Naval recruits some swordsmanship, but I have not had the time.”

“And how are we Gareth? You broke with Fera. You do not sleep at the Shiny Platinum. And we barely talk any longer,” I said sincerely.

Gareth clenched as we were led into a room with a half dozen other dignitaries waiting to be announced. I paused momentarly as one was an elf and another was a bearkin. I was stunned and probably should have researched this dinner a little more thoroughly. I ignored Gareth and asked Bylura, “Who else besides the Sadians are here tonight?”

Bylura was about to leave but paused for me, “Just the Sadians. There is a party from the Emperorer’s court and a pair of representatives from the twenty largest cities. This event is to open free trade.”

A server came to us and asked us what we wanted to drink. Gareth ordered an ale, and I just asked for water. When my water came, I summoned my ice sphere and dropped it into the drink. I walked toward Gareth, who was conversing with the bearkin envoy. He was the only one here that matched Gareth in size. I listened, and they were talking about favored weapons, so I guessed I was not going to have a chance to talk further. I sipped my cold water and put it down when we were called for introductions.

Bylura announced the groups one at a time. And soon, it was just me and Gareth left in the room. Gareth whispered, “They save the most important for last during introductions.”

Bylura said, “Gareth, you are next.” Gareth frowned slightly but moved forward. When did Gareth study court etiquette?

I waited for a minute, and Bylura waved me forward. “Just down the hall through the arc. Wait at the top of the steps, you will be announced, and then you can join the party. I saw Gareth descending and waving as he did so to mild clapping from the people I could not see. I reached the balcony, and there were a lot of people there, maybe five hundred, and not all human.

A man to my right made my announcement, “Storme Hardlight, High Archmage of Aegis City and the Black Spire.” My jaw clenched slightly. I had been set up. I did expect something, but not this. I thought maybe she was planning to introduce me to the Sadians as a powerful Skyholme mage. Calling me a high mage in front of everyone?

A high mage was one step above an archmage. Whereas an archmage was a relatively easy title to obtain, requiring a minimum aether of 100 points and demonstrating mastery in a few spells by achieving ten evolutions. In Skyholme’s definition, a high mage was a mage with mastery of five spells and aether capacity over 1000. I think there were three high mages in all of Skyholme. Maybe four is Selina had revealed herself.

I scanned the crowd for Loriel. There was still silence in the air, and slowly the clapping started and reached a crescendo. I think they did not want to anger the supposed high mage. How was I even named a high mage? I thought there was a council of mages that needed to decide—shit. Did Loriel use my work on her skyship to demonstrate my ability to some deciding mage court of council.

I was walking down the steps with clapping still persisting and all eyes still on me. I would have liked to think it was for my new suit, but I knew they were burning my face into their minds as a person to be feared, respected, and befriended. I had locked on to Loriel, who was in a corner. I moved through the crowd, ignoring people trying to talk with me.

As I reached Loriel, she had on her sweetest smile, “High Mage Hardlight! Glad you found your wat to us. Let me introduce the Emperor’s first advisor, Gabriel and the Emperor’s third son Antioch.” I bowed slightly to both men.

The Emperor’s son, Antioch, appeared to be in in his thirties. I did not recognize him from my one visit to the court in Goldreach. He asked, “You are young for the title of High Mage. May I query as to your specialization?”

I soothed my anger and started to play along. “Healing magic, Prince Antioch?”

“No, not prince. Just Lord Antioch is fine. And in private company, Antioch is preferable.” He sipped his drink, studying me. “Loriel says you are quite the enchanter and have even constructed your own skyship? I tried your ice cream, and it is similar to something I tried from one of the great portal cities.”

I glanced quickly at Loriel, showing my unhappiness at what she had done. Then I responded to Antioch, “I am glad you enjoyed the ice cream. I am just learning the art of enchanting. It has been just over a year.” I admitted, and Antioch and Gabriel both wore surprised expressions. “You have been to a portal city? That must have been quite the voyage.”

Antioch replied, “We used the portal stones, actually. Took three transitions and a few hours.” The Sphere portal network was extensive. Aelyn and Niserie had escaped using it. I nodded and considered using them myself.

The first advisor spoke to me next, “High Mage, how do you feel about the recent changes to Skyholme?” A flicker of panic in Loriel’s eyes hit me. If I said the wrong thing here, I could cause all her plans to come crashing down.

I smirked to make her worried before replying, “I am opposed to any type of slavery or indentured service. Ending that abuse in Skyholme was one of the best things the Triumvirate has done in memory.”

“And what about opening trade? Only three cities on Titan’s Shield Island will allow foreign ships, but I am sure they might quickly become overwhelmed by outsiders,” he said inquisitively.

I considered the question, “Those in Skyholme positioned to profit from open trade will welcome it. Those that will lose will oppose it. What the regular people want will not matter—but if it ends the threat of conflict, they will also welcome it.” I positioned myself between them and Loriel and added, “If you excuse us I need to borrow Loriel for the briefest of moments.” And maybe through her off the island without a feather fall spell.

Loriel said, “I will just be a moment with the High Mage.” She turned, and I followed her into a private side room. She started before I could, “You are angry.”

I did not respond to the statement and just cocked an eyebrow. She added, “If I told you the plan, you would not have attended.”

I asked, “Why do you need me here? I am not a High Mage. Why call me such?”

Loriel offered a weak smile, “We needed a show of power. The Harbingers, the swordmaster, and all the High Mages and Archmages in Skyholme. She handed me a rolled-up parchment from inside her robes. “Your writ as a High Mage. And the deed to the Black Spire and the surrounding estate.”

I took it and opened the rolled parchment. Reading through quickly, I noticed the signatures of twenty-three archmages, including Selina, on the writ, making me a High Mage. I would also have to talk to her about not letting me know about this. The next set of documents was for the Black Spire. This was where we had fought the Bricios and killed Otieno.

I paged through the documents while Loriel waited patiently. Three farms; one was an apple orchard, one was a barley farm, and one was primary dungeon aether produce. The Bricios did control one dungeon, and I thought maybe it was near the Black Spire. I asked, “What about the dungeon?”

Loriel looked angry for the first time, “Do you know the value of these lands?”

“I can read Loriel. It says only as long as I remain a High Mage of Skyholme will I have entitlement to the Spire and the surrounding lands. The Bricios had a dungeon. Was it not part of these lands?” I responded with a slight smile.

Loriel’s lips pursed so hard they turned white. “The dungeon is outside the lands and has not been part of the Black Spire estate for nearly 300 years,” she replied coldly. She still thought she was doing me a favor by painting a target on my back.

I nodded like I was still confused and asked, “And what are the taxes on these lands and the Black Spire?”

Loriel narrowed her eyes, did she think she underestimated me. A cold pause hung in the air. “In order to convince the other two members of the Trivumverate I needed to put certain stipulations on the deed transfer. The first was you only had right as long as Skyholme was your residence and you were alive. The second was the taxes would be commensurate with the value of the property.”

I waited while she held my gaze, “And that is?” I asked.

She relented, “One hundred gold annually for each farm, not including a 20% tax on the harvests. The Black Spire is a deeded fortification. You need to have a minimum number of guards and one skyship for the defense of the island.”

I coughed. “I would have to what?”

She tried to appease me, “Fifty men and one skyship. It is why I had you bring the Heavan’s Reach back to functionality. I could leave it moored there, and it would cover your obligations.” So, it was another plan to entangle me in her web. She continued, “The Black Spire was home to the Haikuram High Wizard Kurota. His personal residence and on the top floor has never been breached.”

I processed this with wide eyes. The Haikuram were the avian race that once ruled Skyholme when it was one island. The mage that broke the island was Kurota. He was even immortalized as a villain by his people on the ceiling mural in the audience chamber of the Heart Stone had been located in. With my mind racing, a small smile played on her lips.

I asked, “And are there taxes associated as well with the Spire?”

Loriel nodded reluctantly, “Five hundred gold a year. But it has dozens of rooms, and all the furnishings from the Bricios remain. It is made from magic-hardened stone, and an unknown aether source fuels the protective runes.”

“Why has it not been broken into before?” I finally asked. The Haikarum race had been eradicated two thousand years ago.

“I can get you the records from the study of the runes. I think there was a fear that breaking the runes incorrectly would destroy the tower,” Loriel supplied. That was not a good selling point. What could I offer that 2000 years of Skyholme mages couldn’t? My dreams of having access to the private chambers and library of the most powerful mage in Skyholme in the last two thousand years had been crushed. Loriel was using the tower to hold me to Skyholme.

I reviewed the papers again. “The aetheric vegetable field for growing potion ingredients in useless without replenishing the soil with dungeon soil,” I stated. “Who is working the farms now?”

Loriel squirmed, “You are well-informed. I did not even know that until I talked with the caretakers.” I knew that from working in Callem’s tobacco fields. His dungeon tobacco only grew in aether soil enriched in a dungeon. “The farmers are mostly maimed Wolfsguard from their time serving. Many are old and were allowed to retire to the farm. There was a large number of indentured on the farm, but they have been released. You will need to find about twenty farmers to go with the forty-one Wolfsguard.”

That shocked me a little. “The Wolfsguard—were they bonded to anyone?

“They were Blackguard, and some whose bonded were killed,” she stated. When a Wolfsguard bonded died, they usually went into a depressive state and killed themselves eventually. Those that could still fight usually became Blackguard—those who could not apparently became farmers for the Bricios.

I looked closely again at the papers, “The orchards are mostly a green apple. Used primarily in cooking desserts for its high sugar content and tartness. Not a great choice for trading,” I noted. At least the barely fields appeared to be a good strain for making ale, but I would have to make sure with Mera.

I finally said, “Send me all the documents and leave nothing out. If you do, it will be the end of any relationship I have with you and Skyholme. You will supply my access to the dungeon once a week for my team to harvest the soil I need for the dungeon crops. It will be at your personal expense, not mine. I will pay the taxes and review what kind of force I need to maintain on the property to satisfy the joint defense clause.”

I was about to leave and paused, “We are not friends, Loriel. The more you manipulate me, the closer we become to becoming enemies. Send me what you found out about Aelyn’s and her mother’s use of the portal stone.” I turned and left, acting angry but seeing possibilities.

I was curious if I needed to supply a warship or if the Maelstrom would suffice. After I purchased their weapons and armor, maintaining fifty armed soldiers would not be a huge expense. I think Loriel thought I was making large profits on my trips to the lowlands. Which was true. If I had to get another skyship, I could move Leda and Cilia off the Maelstrom to crew it. They had been friends with Loriel too long. I did trust them but would feel more comfortable with them not looking over my shoulder. Not that many of my secrets seemed to be hidden, High Freaking Mage Storme Hardlight! So much for being anonymous in the Skyholme after this little stunt.