Chapter 75 (Arc 2 Chapter 29)

The table of five women and Bylura, the runt wolfsguard, looked at me as I approached. Many had smiles on their face, and it was Leda who jumped out of her seat wearing a dark gray uniform to come and hug me. Leda spoke, “Storme, it is good to see you,” she said in my ear before backing up. “We saw you fight and knew you would win every time!”

I saw Tessa Torrent grimace. Her platinum blond hair was done up in a bun. She was also wearing very fashionable clothes. Lorial seeing me staring at Tessa, spoke with a sly smile, “I ran into my good friend in the capital a few days ago and told her about this fabulous new restaurant opening in Aegis city. I told a lot of my friends,” she waved her hand around at the filling dining room.

Tessa’s face was turning red under her makeup, “I asked to come when I heard it was your restaurant. What do you suggest on the menu?” It was obvious she didn’t want Loriel to take credit for her presence here.

Cillia was smiling at me but had not stood, maintaining decorum unlike Leda. I addressed Tessa, “If you like something spicy, then I suggest the BBQ gargoyle burger with the red pepper fries.” She looked down at the menu and then over at the painting of two gargoyles with silver orbs for eyes standing in the rain.

“I dint think I have ever tried gargoyle before,” she started, and I laughed. I hit my cleanliness smell, giving me a strong scent of vanilla, and walked over to her chair. Loriel’s massive wolfsguard tensed as I approached Tessa, who was seated next to Loriel.

I ignored him and showed her how to read the menu. “This row here is all the burgers made with beef, and this side is the chicken. Here are the toppings and sauces for each sandwich. Then you have to select what type of fried potato stick you want and the dipping sauce. Right now, we just have ale, water, and stout for drinks.”

I had been close enough to smell her perfume, and it reminded me of strawberries. My explanation of the menu got the others to figure out what they wanted. I stepped away from the table and told the waiting server the meal for this table was on me and gave her a large silver. I made to retreat to the kitchen.

I heard a few people complaining about the cost of the food. They shouldn’t complain once they receive it, though. The size of the burger and the amount of fries were twice of food a normal restaurant would plate out. Most of the conversation was about the murals, which made me happy. The lighting on them added to their depth. I stopped and announced loudly, “Thank you for coming to our opening. Please feel free to walk the gallery of murals. The Shiny Platinum is a place of exquisite art and food!”

My announcement had half the seated people start to wander. It caused chaos for the servers trying to get orders and keep track of people at their assigned tables. The only child in the restaurant was staring at the panel of the black dragon fighting an adventurer. He was enthralled so much by the dragon that I paused and closed my eyes. I went into my pocket and created copper, and then made a fist-sized replica of the dragon. I pulled it out and handed it to the boy, smiled, and continued to the kitchen.

I started asking why we didn’t have twenty burgers on the grill already. They hadn’t received orders, but they could see all the people out there! Soon chicken and burgers were being cooked in anticipation of orders. The barkeeps were going into the walk-in to fill drink orders. Baskets of fries were being dropped in the hot lard. I checked the stock of rolls and got the bakers going on more. Then I schooled my two head cooks for the next hour.

Things never went smoothly on an opening, but they were managing. The dishwashers were being sent on runs in the city to get supplies that were getting low. When I felt the chaos was manageable, I headed up to my room. I was surprised to find Remy next to me. He had been helping below.

Remy nervously started, “Storme, what do I do with the coin? It is so much, and I don’t know where to put it. Someone paid with a gold, and I had to run to my room to make the change.”

It was one of those things you didn’t think of. Since I had set the cost of a meal at one silver, I just assumed everyone would pay with one silver coin. “Remy, you should hire a money changer to work during hours, so you don’t have to do all this work. We can head over to the Depository in the city and establish an account for the restaurant and bakery as well. Let’s do that now.”

I already had an account at the Depository that Wynna had set up for me. I had circumnavigated using it but just making coins for expenses. As we walked, I explained, “When you need to make a deposit or withdrawal, you should grab two of the three guards from the warehouse to accompany you.”

Remy nodded as we talked about his security and how to document different business transactions. It took over two hours to get Remy set up at the Depository and get his token linked to just him. I deposited three platinum into the new account. If the restaurant did well, then I should never have to add more to the account in the future.

I was glad this was one more headache I wouldn’t have to deal with. On the walk back, Remy started talking, “I have been looking into the delve team that shorted us on the stone. They primarily deal in stone, lumber, and soil from dungeons. I think they operate in the capital at the *Whitestone Chasm* dungeon. That is the dungeon that the Bricio’s have complete control over. It is located on the estate of the Halifax Bricio. He has two sons who manage the dungeon, Abaddon Bricio and Baladan Bricio. The dungeon is their own private bank.”

I knew of Abaddon Bricio. He had raped Cillia at the naval academy, and Loriel was trying to escape his intentions to wed her. I looked at Remy as I walked and asked, “How did you figure all this out so quickly?”

Remy stuttered, “I spent a lot of time at the adventurer’s guild hall. Many of the delvers that hang out there have been around for a while. They like to talk. One veteran, Ullmark, used to work on the Bricio estate and used to delve the dungeon.”

I thought as we were getting closer and closer to the warehouse, “Why did he leave?”

Remy looked uncertain, “I think he didn’t like the Bricio’s—or maybe what he saw. He knows to keep his mouth shut. The Bricio’s are pretty unforgiving.” Remy looked a little scared himself talking about the Bricio’s with his eyes darting around.

“Is this Ullmark part of a delve team?” I asked.

“No, he is kind of a freelancer. He charges two gold per delve to help teams in the *Icy Vault*,” Remy said.

“Do you think he is a good person?” I asked Remy seriously.

“Good? Not bad, for sure. He used to buy me an ale when I was depressed. He always helps new delvers too. Gives them a quick education on the Icy Vault,” Remy said, looking at me questioningly.

I nodded, and said, “Tell Gimble to go interview him to see if he is a good fit for our delve team.”

Remy shook his head, “I don’t think he will join. He likes his independence.”

“That is fine. There is no problem with Gimble talking to him and asking,” I said as we reached the Shiny Platinum. “I am going to be working on finishing the plumbing for the apartments and enchanting the kitchens. If something that needs my attention comes up try to handle it yourself before coming to get me. I am taking the late skyship to Hen’s Hollow and will be resuming my academy training. We will be back every seventh day for a dungeon delve.” I shook my head. Somehow I had become a delver.

I knocked on doors and then bypassed locks with my metal-shaping ability. I left the doors open as I finished the plumbing and did some quick artificing for the small fridge units and the stovetops. I had finished the third floor and was just starting on the first room on the second floor, it was Aelyn’s room. Aelyn came to the door when I knocked and was surprised to see me. Her face turned red. Was Gareth in the room? I asked myself.

“I wanted to finish connecting the water and the enchant you cooler and stove,” I explained to her. She nodded and was about to move aside when Isla shouted from the other end of the hall.

“Storme! Come and join us!” Isla was beaming as they were making their way up the stairs to the third floor were Loriel’s room was. It was Cillia, Leda, Tessa, Loriel, Bylura, Isla and Gammon, Loriel’s wolfsguard. Soon Leda and was aving her hands for me to join them. It was Tessa with the group that finally made up my mind though.

“Sorry Aelyn, I will work on it next seventh day. Do you want to join us? I don’t want to be outnumbered six to one,” I asked already knowing her answer.

Aelyn surprised me, though, “Yes. I haven’t talked with Leda and Cillia in a long time.” She closed the door behind, and a missile was launched from the other end when she got into the hall.

I dodged the human projectile of Leda, who embraced Aelyn, “If we had known you were here, you could have eaten with us and come shopping with us!” She took Aelyn’s arm and escorted her to the waiting group. I smelled a strong indication that Leda was heavily intoxicated. I almost neutralized it but then thought maybe the entire group was a bit tipsy. Maybe I could get some answers.

We went to the corner apartment which Loriel had claimed, and the living room was a horseshoe of padded furniture for entertaining. I took a seat on a two-person seat, and Aelyn immediately sat next to me, like she was claiming the spot. Everyone in the group had signs of intoxication—except Bylura.

“Bylura, please get us some of the Miaden Red vintage,” Loriel said. Bylura went and poured out glasses of red wine and handed them out. I took a glass and sipped it. Very fruity and high in alcohol content.

Tessa was the first to address me, “Storme, I was very impressed with your restaurant.” A chorus of affirmations came from the others. The conversation switched to the food and especially the fried potato sticks and dipping sauces. We had four varieties of potatoes, and two were slightly sweet, and two were more starchy. Interestingly, they were all different colors: purple, gold, white, and blue.

The drunk women tried to decide on the best fry, but everyone had a different opinion. Loriel sent Bylura down to the restaurant to get the assortment of sauces and plates of each variety of fry so they could decide. While we waited for Bylura, Loriel talked, “So Storme, now that you have what is sure to be a successful restaurant. What are you going to do next?”

I had an eager array of beautiful women hanging on my every word, “The restaurant still needs some tweaking. A wider array of beverages. And I want to offer different sides other than the fried potato sticks—mac ‘ n’ cheese and fried onion rings.” Aelyn squeezed my arm. Aelyn loved junk food, and onion rings were at the top of her list.

Two servers from the restaurant entered with trays of sauces and fries. Bylura followed them in. The servers bowed and rushed out. I looked at Bylura, “Bylura if you used my name to get this delivered so quickly, I am guessing you didn’t pay for the food?” Her eyes met mine with a challenging stare. I tossed her two silver coins, which she snatched out of the air. “Go give these to the two servers.” Bylura left in a huff.

I smiled inside because I knew what was going to happen after I said my next, “I also plan to add milkshakes to the menu. That is ice cream blended with milk to make a thick creamy drink.”

“You have ice cream!” Leda shouted. Aelyn squeezed my arm in excitement as well.

“Yes, we have just chocolate and vanilla, but it will not be on the menu for a while. I suppose I could have the head cook make up some special milkshakes so you can try them,” I said conspiratorially.

Tessa asked, “What is a milkshake?”

Left to go to the kitchens, which were extremely busy. Surprisingly the restaurant was still full, and there was a short line outside. I guessed the novelty of my establishment was spreading through the city. I didn’t hear any complaints about the pricing either. I pulled a cook aside and had him make the milkshakes and send a server up with them when they were ready.

I found my manager and asked him how things were going. The old veteran was sweating but smiling, “I will say, other than the few wolfsguard standing behind a few of the customers, things are going great. The wolfsguard scare the customers a bit,” he explained.

“That can not be helped,” I said and only spotted one wolfsguard currently standing at a table with an array of men in magistrate suits.

My manager supplied, “The Miaden port controllers. Their offices are on the other side of the docking platforms. With how much they are enjoying the food, I expect you will see them in here every day.”

“Give them bottomless ale,” I said, and then I had to explain the concept. Basically, free refills to garner goodwill.

I was about to head up the stairs when the manager stopped me, “Storme, sir. The young boy you gave that statue of the dragon to—he asked if there were more of the other creatures in the paintings.” It took me a second to remember I had made a copper figurine of the black dragon and handed it to the only child who was eating in the restaurant at the time.

I thought for a bit. I had made it on impulse and not given it a second thought. It was pure copper, too, a soft metal so the boy could bend the wings and legs into other poses. If I was going to merchandise figurines, then bronze was an alloy that was much better. Did I really want to waste my time on making figurines, though?

“No, there are no more figurines. But install some shelves on the wall over there,” I pointed. “I will see if I can find a crafter to make some. They won’t be cheap, though.” He nodded, and I made my way upstairs. I wanted to get some questions answered.

I entered, and the milkshakes were right behind me. The cook must have worked hard to get them done in so short a time as my conversation with the manager. I watched as the woman around the room sampled the drinks. Definitely a lot of sweet tooths here.

“So, Loriel. Tell me about your problems with Abaddon Bricio,” I went straight to the point.

The entire room went silent, and Gammon’s muscles flexed. Cillia’s face had been soft, and although she had been quiet and enjoying the conversation, it suddenly went hard. That same hardness when I first met her. Leda put her arm on her for support. Even Tessa had a look of disgust on her face.

Loriel cautiously asked, “Why do you ask?”

“I recently found out a company that his delve team supplies cheated me out of a few golds,” I said unconcernedly.

Tessa entered the conversation, “You should just avoid dealing with them. If you blow too much wind at him, he will retaliate, Storme. My family has had unpleasant dealings with them in the past. If my father didn’t passionately hate his entire family, then I may be stuck in Loriel’s shoes.”

Isla spoke, “Loriel may be in the line of succession for the Miaden seat, but she is on her own. She has no support. She has to fend off everyone.” Loriel waved her hand to silence her friend’s support.

Loriel looked at me for a moment as the room remained silent. It is evident that she was the power focal point of this group she was assembling around her. A group she was trying to get me to be part of, but I kept resisting. I wanted to know why Tessa was now in this circle. Was she here because of our duel and how I acted like a love-struck puppy?

Loriel finally spoke, “There is much more going on in Skyhold than most people know. The very balance of power and the fate of the people are played for sport. A few generations ago, the Bricio’s raised the stakes. They took pieces off the board with subterfuge. Successors disappeared in dungeons, went to the lowlands and never returned, came down with incurable illnesses, suddenly resigned and went into seclusion, and many more things not in the histories Storme.”

So far, her pitch had nothing surprising in it. I wasn’t moved at all. She continued, “The recent onslaught by the Sadians,” she looked around the room at her audience before continuing, “was the first terrible move in generations by the Bricio’s. Not only is the Skyholme navy greatly weakened, but we lost dozens of our most powerful mages, dozens, Storme. They will lay the blame at the feet of the Torrent family, but everyone in Skyhold knows the Bricio’s were the ones making the decisions.”

I knew that thousands had died in the attack. Mages were rare; only one in ten persons were born with an awakened core strong enough for high-tier magic. I looked at Cilia for confirmation.

Cilia nodded, “My grandfather has told me something similar. He thinks there will be a draft once the new Harbinger skyships are ready. The navy does not have enough combat mages for the vessels or to recharge their aether power crystals.”

“So, what is the point of your collection of friends here?” I asked Loriel, trying to get to the point of her pursuit of me and bringing them into her inner circle. Tessa, who was very new to this group, looked a little apprehensive but looked to Loriel as well.

Loriel bit her lip, thinking, “At first, I just wanted to surround myself to be protected. It is not just Abaddon who I am concerned about. Now I am making plans to flee if Skyholme collapses like I think it will. The Bricio’s are working to enforce terms of service from all mages with power. The kickback will be immense, and I think it will tear Skyholme apart.”

I looked doubtfully at Loriel. Sebastian had similar thoughts, though. The Triumvirate had a strong enough pulse for the people to know if something was going to start a civil war.

Loriel continued, “It has already started, Storme. Ask Talia next time you see her. She will confirm it for you. The lesser mages at the Arcanium Academy, not already contracted, are being funneled to the navy.”

I stewed a bit as my company regained their stomachs and finished most of the food. Why was I being dragged into this? What could I do to protect my family?

I asked open-endedly, “How long do you think?”

Loriel grabbed the last purple fry on the tray and munched it unconcerned. She was hiding a smugness—she thought she had won me over. She finally said, “The draft would occur at the end of this academy year. It will just include mages, not bound. That will coincide with the commissioning of five new Harbinger skyships. This round will cause some unrest but will only target the low-hanging fruit, the mages not tied to Triumvirate families.”

Rather than fall into Loriel’s camp I stood, “Thank you for the information.” I looked at Aelyn, “We should head back to Hen’s Hollow.”

Loriel quickly said, “I can fly you back at any time on my skyship.” Cilia and Leda wearing their dark gray uniforms looked hopeful I would accept.

“No, we can take the regular transport. Thank you for getting the restaurant off to a great start. Loriel, the rent for the apartments is three gold per month. The agreement was you could have one of the apartments, not live here rent-free. Remy is two doors down. You can pay him.” I left the room with murmuring going on.

Aelyn asked as we went down the stone stairs, “You are charging her rent too? Don’t you think that was a little vicious?”

I chuckled, “Not in the least. These apartments are worth more than triple that. Looking at the furniture in her living room she probably spent two or three hundred gold in that room alone. This way, I am not doing her any favors that she has to repay me in the future.”

We reached the top of the platform, and I asked the air, “Why was Tessa Torrent there?”

Aeyln interjected, “What? What do you mean?”

I faced her, “They said they recruited her because I flirted with her when we fought. I definitely found her attractive,” Aelyn frowned, “but I thought she would be smarter than get pulled into these games. Maybe my hope was hollow wishing.”

Aelyn offered, “She was there for you, Storme. Not Loriel. I could see her staring every time your eyes were off her and….”

I grinned somewhat madly, “What did your ability tell you Aelyn? Did you read anyone else?”

Aelyn sighed, “yes. I have been working on my ability with Selina. It is kind of like a spell form, and it has gotten slightly stronger. I still can not read Callem.” I looked at her impatiently. “Tessa is infatuated with you. Someone outside the three houses with a confident bearing.” I wanted to fist-pump but just nodded slightly. “Isla is the same…though she thinks of you in more physical terms.”

I turned away from Aelyn to hide my grin. I asked, “and the others?”

Aelyn quipped, “Bylura wants to tie you up and whip you. She can not decide if she wants you shirtless or completely naked, though.” We both chuckled. “Leda was actually thinking about me—she did have some thoughts of you, but she wanted to kiss my lips.” I nodded as Leda preferred the female gender.

“And Cilia?” I quired.

“Cilia’s thoughts were elsewhere. A little confusing, but I think she was thinking about revenge on Abaddon. You didn’t ask about Loriel.” Aelyn relayed.

“What did you glean from our heiress to the Miaden seat?” I asked curiously.

Aelyn smiled devilishly, “Oh, she definitely is fantasizing about you. But I think what she said is true. She is worried about the fate of Skyholme. She was harder to read than the others.”

I nodded, “Aelyn forgot what I said about not using your ability. It is too useful. We should spend more time together than just dungeon delving too.” Her pale elven face flushed pink. “I need your help to navigate this cesspool of upper society. When we get back, we are going to talk with Callem and see if Sebastian can confirm what Loriel said. If it is true, then I need to start planning to keep my family safe.”

Our skyship finally called for us to board. We were headed back to Hen’s Hollow after a working vacation.