Chapter 86 (Arc 2 Chapter 40)

*Baladon’s POV*

*Baladon was a prodigy among his family. His older brother, Abaddon, always thought directly and was unrestrained in his actions. Their father and uncle, Otieno, had to cover up a lot of Abaddon’s missteps recently. But Abaddon had a leader’s charisma that Baladon lacked. Even with Abaddon’s malice, he still attracted followers. For this, he admired his brother.*

*Otieno Bricio was the sitting member of the Three, and he brought the brothers in on a plan to weaken the Torrent family. Otieno wanted Keelan Torrent to replace Abbos Torrent in the line of succession. Keelan had a half-sister Tessa, who was a model of beauty, and they were extremely close. Their grandfather favored both Keelan and Tessa, and he had made public the knowledge they would be added to the line of succession when they completed their eight years of the academy.*

*Otieno’s plan was simple. Tessa would bring her brother to the Sowing Festival, and Baladon would conspire to get Tessa to disparage the Bricio family. Baladon would call for an honor duel, and Tessa would point out Keelan. Then Otieno would step in and raise his favored grandson to the line of succession to avoid dueling Baladon. Very simple.*

*It went well with a Bricio mage planting thoughts in Tessa’s head to choose her brother as champion and to disparage the Bricio house. Both thoughts would seed easily as they were well within her nature. Then they would supply her with an Unfiltered Truth potion. This was extremely delicate, but the Bricio’s had enough agents within the Citadel to make it happen.*

*Everything proceeded smoothly until Tessa was to select Keelan as her champion. Her escort then stepped between Tessa and Keelan, professing he was selected! It was ridiculous as everyone could see she would have selected her brother, but Tessa could resist the truth potion enough not to voice an objection.*

*Abaddon knew the young man with Tessa. He didn’t remember his name but did know he had thwarted a plot to get Loriel Miaden to his bed. Baladon doubted his brother’s plan was very inventive, and if it had succeeded, it would have been another mess for the family to clean up. Abaddon remembered that the boy had wielded a staff in the pre-Annuals and was from a tiny village on Titan’s Shield. That told Baladon he was probably extremely poor but had some type of aptitude with the weapon.*

*At the Triumvertate table, Otieno looked extremely upset his plans had failed to come to fruition. His own father wanted to get what he could from this hiccup, which at this point was going to be embarrassing to Tessa Torrent. Abaddon even leaned in and promised to purchase Baladon a tier 3 spell if he succeeded in the duel. That alone was a reason to win. Baladon spent all his allowance from the Bricio dungeon on spells. His aether matrix was currently full, but he might be able to expand it enough to add another tier 3 spell in the future.*

*When they were summoned to the table to negotiate the terms of the Honor Duel, Pomore offered his apple orchards to Baladon to drop the matter. The orchards were worth a lot more than a tier 3 spell. But Otieno Bricio gave him a hard look, and he declined the offer. Better to stay on the good side of Otieno and not let greed cloud his judgment.*

*The terms for the duel were a contest of spell and sword. This would be the easiest duel of Baladon’s life. He had five offensive fire spells at his disposal, and the young man before him probably only had magic for less than a year. He had also made sure that only bladed weapons could be used so the boy’s proficiency with the staff would not come into play.*

*His father pulled him aside on their walk to the Audience Chamber and gave him a rack of twelve healing potions, his necklace of invisibility, and his mithril weave shirt. His father didn’t want to take any chances. He would have to return the necklace and mithril shirt, but he could keep the potions. The rack of potions was all from the same brew, so he could drink them in succession without fear of an adverse effect. They all then proceeded to the chamber, ready to enjoy the show.*

*As they were situated on their marks, Baladon’s thoughts were to just keep the duel interesting and not let the boy close. He started with his fire igniter spell. It had ten evolutions and was a pretty fireball that could be thrown up to fifty feet. It barely took any aether to cast, but it was flashy and should keep the boy away. The problem was that the small fireball was easy to cast and the boy, Storme, was mocking him by sidestepping the fireballs and not moving closer.*

*Baladon decided the boy needed a lesson and cast his fire arrow. It was almost impossible to dodge at 600 mph. He got a satisfying strike on Storme. He was going to return to his fire ignitor spell, but Storme decided to engage. Storme threw something, and Baladon responded with another fire arrow and erected a thermal shield spell to deflect the attack while casting another fire arrow. He watched as he identified the objects as dice? Land well short of him.*

*A bright flash burned his eyes when the dice struck the ground, and a loud sound wrecked his hearing. Baladon cast a powerful fire halo spell to keep the nuisance away while he oriented himself. If the boy had rushed in, he might even be finished off by the wave of fire from the spell. Baladon quickly summoned a healing potion and drank it.*

*He then moved away quickly and utilized the invisibility necklace. Baladon felt the blade bite his shin. Storme had managed to close in even after the fire wave should have blown him back. He swore as he skipped away in pain and summoned another healing potion from his dimensional storage. He limped while consuming a second potion and getting his sight completely restored.*

*His temper flared, but he paused to consider. Too many surprises so far. It was best to end this now. Storme’s clothes were singed, but he looked mostly unharmed himself. He must be using a lot of aether to heal himself. How much reserves could he possibly have left? Baladon moved around to Storme’s flank and cast his most powerful spell. Flaming Cone. It was a tier 3 spell that burned a path of fire and would probably kill Storme but would assure an end to this farce. If he had been forced to fight Keelan he would have used this spell as his accidental coup de grace. That was Otieno’s backup plan—end Keelan if they had decided to fight instead of promoting him to a succession seat. Now this Storme would face his end. He channeled a lot of aether into the spell to ensure it finished him.*

*The bloom of fire erupted forward and engulfed the young man. Baladon felt no remorse. It wouldn’t be the first person he killed. As the flames died, Baladan stutter-stepped. The boy had somehow moved out of the cone. His clothes were on fire, and his hair was mostly gone, but his burnt skin was already flaking off from a healing spell. This boy was starting to get on his nerves.*

*As he healed, Storme started walking confidently toward him. Damn it, Baladon swore to himself. He was almost out of aether. He drew his sword. He still practiced with the blade, but not as much as he used to. He cleared his thoughts and moved to meet the persistent cockroach.*

*Baladon threw some mini-fireballs at Storme and was surprised when they splashed on a shield. An air shield? No, it had to be an aether shield, as the air shield would have made a hissing sound on impact. Where did this boy get the aether shield spell? Well, it was time to test the boy’s swordsmanship.*

*After the first few exchanges, he was ready to kill Abaddon and Storme! This boy was trained in more than just the staff! The stupid aether shields made it difficult to get an advantage. He was losing—not only was he losing to an inferior but also to a crowd of his peers. He didn’t have enough aether for another fire halo or flaming cone spell. He started to exchange blows with the boy. Unlike Storme, he had to retreat and drink a healing potion to heal. Storme just healed immediately, almost like he had a regeneration ability.*

*Baladon used a variant of his fireball spell and cast a wave of sparks in the air to highlight the aether shields. Damn it. The boy was able to maintain three aether shields at once! His only weakness was to destroy the shields before he could recast them. Baladon pressed the attack in this way, seeking a victory that seemed to be slipping further and further away.*

*He had enough aether for one, maybe two fire arrows. He used a feint and cast the fire arrow aimed at Storme’s head, but the boy picked up on the movement and dodged. Baladon should have targeted the body after taking down the aether shield. Damn it.*

*Then Storme spoke, “I believe I have injured you. That means you can concede if you wish, correct?” The common boy was mocking him.*

*Baladon committed again to the attack and took many wounds, and used the healing potions as needed as they moved across the floor. The crowd loved the spectacle—Baladon did not. Storme seemed to focus and showed no signs of aether exhaustion or physical exhaustion. Was he even human? Before he realized it, he was down to just two healing potions. If this ended with his loss, he would have to give Storme his arms and armor. That was not going to happen. His father would kill him if he lost the mithril shirt to this boy.*

*He tried a flanking maneuver after shattering an aether shield, getting close. The boy reached out with his free hand and grabbed the mithril shirt for leverage. Baladon braced, expecting to be yanked forward. Instead, the mithril shirt tore like paper. He stumbled back, shocked. The shirt had protected him from a dozen attacks and now barely covered his upper torso. It would be more of a hindrance in its current state. He might have one more fire arrow—no he did not. He ground his teeth and spoke loudly, “I concede.”*

*His eyes burned into the boy as the shocked crowd had mixed reactions. Baladon was not spiteful, but he needed to rectify this slight. His information of this boy was incomplete. He had come into this match overconfident. He turned to leave, but Pomare Torrent yelled to him, “Baladon! You must leave your arms and armor.”*

*Baladon felt the stares of the crowd on him and returned before the Triumvirate huddled around the champion. Otieno had outrage on his face at Baladon’s failure. Baladon removed the mithril shirt and tossed his sheathed sword on the ground. That sword was a dungeon prize that he received from his father on his 14th birthday. Another sting to his pride.*

*Baladon was about to turn when someone whispered something in Pomare’s ear. Pomare immediately said, “Baladon, I have been told you also used the enchantment on the necklace gracing your neck. As per the accords, any item used in an Honor Duel is the prize of the winner.” Baladon thought about telling the crowd he had imprinted the invisibility spell, but he wouldn’t be able to prove it. He unclasped the necklace and tossed it at Pomare. Another dungeon treasure. Maybe Otieno could get it back for his father.*

*Baladon stormed off, unhindered now. His brother was going to get a piece of his mind—after his aether recovered.*