Chapter 87 (Arc 2 Chapter 41)

I waited while Pomare Torrent led the other Triumvirate members toward me, a grin plastering his face as he approached.  He raised his hands to get the attention of the crowd. The crowd had remained, waiting for the pronouncement.  He stopped Baladon from leaving, “Baladon, you must leave your arms and armor!”

The young Bricio mage soured and stared me down as he removed the damaged mithril chain shirt.  He tossed it at my feet with his sheathed longsword.  I held off picking it up.  That mithril chain probably had 50 large mithril coins of weight to it.  A single mithril coin was worth ten platinum. That would be about 5,000 platinum or 500,000 gold.  There was no way they were going to let me walk out of here with it.  I wasn’t about to offer it back to the Bricios, though.

An older woman with a Miaden signet ring whispered something into Pomare’s ear as the crowd stared at the spectacle. Pomare snidely said, “Baladon, I have been told you also used the enchantment on the necklace gracing your neck during the duel.  As per the accords, any item used in an Honor Duel is the prize of the winner.”  Baldon’s face went neutral, but he unclasped the necklace and tossed it gently at Pomare, who caught it easily.  Baladon gave me one last stare before spinning on his heel and leaving.

Tessa was at my side as Pomare announced the obvious result of the Honor Duel between the Torrent and Bricio house.   “The Bricios have been determined by the fate of combat to be in the wrong.  There has been slight against my granddaughter, Tessa Torrent, and a formal apology will be addressed to the Triumvirate.”  Life seemed to flow into Pomare as he finished his announcement.  All of this, and the only result was the Bricios had to do was issue a formal apology?

Tessa whispered to me, “My grandfather wants to meet you, and we can get some hair growth elixir from the Citadel alchemist.”

I reached up and felt my head. I was missing almost all of my hair. A few patches had survived. I closed my eyes, focused on my hair follicles and used my lesser restoration spell to grow my hair. I soon had a shaggy mess. Tessa couldn’t resist running her fingers through my new hair, which I admit was welcome.

I looked for Gareth but didn’t see him in the crowd. Seeing me scanning the dispersing nobles, Tessa offered, “Gareth and Loriel returned to her apartments in the Citadel. We should talk to my grandfather before joining them.”

I didn’t like the lingering nobles around me. They reminded me of Loriel, eager to use me to their advantage. A Wolfguard came and collected the items that Baladon had discarded and followed the direction that Pomare had left in. He must be trying to make assurances that I would talk with him by taking my prizes. I figured I had no choice at this point. I started walking with Tessa, following two Wolfguard in Torrent uniforms.

Tessa spoke quietly after we reached the corridors, “Why did you do it? You didn’t have to.”

I wanted to say that I regretted stepping in and acting like a lovestruck puppy trying to garner favor with her. I was certain her allure aura ability wasn’t affecting me, but I was just enamored with Tessa, her beauty, and her mannerisms. I finally spoke, “What’s done is done.” At least I had made the choice myself and not been placed in the line of fire by someone like Loriel.

“My grandfather will explain things better than I could. I think you have greatly upset the boat. The ripple you created is possibly a wave that could have a lasting impact,” She said seriously. I just knew that I had put a target on my back and possibly my family’s. I would need to use this meeting with Pomare to make sure my family was protected.

We moved into the fortress, and the Wolfguard dressed in black changed to Wolfguard dressed in Torrent colors of white and silver. This was the wing of the Citadel where the Torrent apartments resided. We approached a large double door that two Wolfguard attendants opened. The room reminded me of Loriel’s entry room, just grander. We were led to a side room and found Pomare there in the study. The shelves had hundreds of books, and the old man looked up with a wide smile. The mithril shirt and sword were on the desk in the center of the room.

“Storme Hardlight! I should have guessed my granddaughter’s escort was more than he seemed!” His smile seemed to get wider and wider as he poured some wine for us. “Do you realize what you have done?”

He handed me a glass, and I took it but didn’t drink, “No. Tessa told me you would explain.”

He pointed at the mithril shirt, “That belonged to Halifax Bricio. He likes to display his wealth openly and wears that everywhere, not just for his protection but as a symbol. After the Sadian attack, he used it as collateral for loans to rebuild his estates with loans from the Miadens. He will be under financial pressure now that he lost it so publicly.” He took a deep drink and savored the wine.

“Oh, I am sure his family will bail him out but not for free. If one thing can be said of a Bricio, they hate public weakness, even among their own! You have single handily weakened the most powerful arm of the Bricio family!” Pomare said excitedly.

I decided it was a good time to voice my concerns, “What should I be doing to protect myself?”

Pomare put down his wine and thought, “Yes. I understand your concern. He went to the desk and fingered the mithril shirt. “If you left here with this, then half the Citadel would be willing to kill you for it.” He looked into my eyes, his gray eyes appraising me. “I think it is best that we spread the word that this was all a counterplot by myself to obtain this mithril shirt. I can spread the rumors that I hired you as my granddaughter’s escort to confront Baladon.”

“So you get the mithril shirt, and I get your protection?” I asked with uncertainty. Did Pomare think I didn’t realize this one chain shirt was worth more than a single armored Harbinger skyship?

He seemed to sense some distrust from me. “Storme, I will take it from you, but I will compensate you.” He walked to a shelf and pushed hard on a stone rosette. I didn’t see it move but heard a click. Pomare turned and smiled, “Mechanical devices are still the best to hide from magical detection.” The entire panel between the shelves swung inward to reveal a narrow hallway. “Come, Storme. Tessa, you as well.”

We followed him down the corridor into a small room that was maybe ten feet by ten feet and lined with a handful of small aether lights. On one wall, there were a handful of books and what I recognized as dungeon essences. Getting closer, the books were spellbooks from dungeons. Tessa’s mouth was agape as well at the treasure in here. Pomare spoke, “While this room was secret a thousand years ago, it is almost common knowledge. I have four Wolfguard constantly guarding it now, but it is still the safest place in the Citadel for generations of treasures waiting to be used.” He looked at Tessa, “When you are raised to your ascension seat, you will be gifted a treasure from here.”

Pomare let us look for a minute longer, “Storme, I have two treasures in here that may be a fair exchange.” He took two dungeon essences off the shelf. He motioned for us to follow him out to the study and placed the items on the table next to the mithril shirt while resealing the secret chamber. I realized he showed me the dozens of treasures as a power play. To show that the Torrent family was not weak and had resources.

The dungeon essences were small potion vials with swirling liquids inside. The container was covered in a runic script. The aetheric script told you what the essence would do. You consumed them, and they dissolved rapidly in your mouth. Gareth told me about when he consumed his essence prize from the Annuals. He described it as euphoric. I couldn’t read the aetheric dungeon script, so I waited for Pomare. He was waiting for me to ask what the essences were. When I didn’t, he sulked slightly and told me.

“The essences are tier two and tier three. One is *aether reclamation*. It will increase your aether recovery by 20% and double your aether tolerance,” my eyes opened wide, and Pomare smiled. “I was saving that for the next archmage in my family.”

I knew aether tolerance determined how much a mage could use daily. It was usually based on a mage’s total aether core and could double with aetheric exercises I already did over time. This dungeon essence increased the speed at which the aether core was refilled and allowed me to use more aether in a day. I was already aware that the aether I used to create metal with my ability did not affect my aether tolerance. Only the aether that I pushed through my imprinted spells on my aether matrix counted toward my aether tolerance.

But more importantly, this essence could increase the amount of metal I could make by 20%. Seeing my surprise, Pomare beamed, “You might not have a large arsenal of spells yet, but you demonstrated the depth of your aether core when you fought Baladon. I know you want this.” He tapped the other vial with a swirling green liquid that had a slight glow to it, “This is a tier 3 essence.” He waited for my reaction, and I couldn’t hide the surprise on my face. “Don’t get too excited. It is tier three, but a dozen of my predecessors couldn’t find a use for it. It requires a lot of aether to use. And it will not work on the islands as long as the Heart Stone is active. But,” He smiled, “It should work in dungeons.”

I picked up the vial and turned it in my hands. I waited, and he finally said, “It is called *Exchange*. It is a teleport ability, but you exchange your place with another target. I know it sounds extremely useful, but it requires a lot of aether to use. Our research on this essence said it would cost almost 100 aether to use at 100 feet, and aether expense increases the further distance. So it is useless in combat for a Torrent mage who doesn’t have a large aether core—but you who is both a mage and fighter….”

I could see a lot of possibilities. Porting to an enemy skyship, getting behind an enemy formation, escaping from an undesirable situation…it was a very strong ability for both flight and fight. I already thought the *aether reclamation essence* was extremely fair since I didn’t value the mithril shirt as much as Pomare. It would probably take me almost a year to make that much mithril, but I could do it.

It looked like Pomare Torrent wasn’t done with his offer, though. After I looked ready to accept, he continued talking, “I am willing to shade you under the Torrent family, Storme. After today the Bricios will be after some revenge, and anyone who has any sense after seeing that fight will be making plans to get you in their house.”

I had doubts about the latter, but I was certain the Bricios would be after me. I was fine with that as long as they didn’t target my family. I asked, “What does your protection entail?”

The same man who had given Pomare a brief bio about me stepped out of the shadows. He walked over to Pomare and handed him a book. Pomare opened the book to a bookmarked page. “This book, Storme, is the registry of the two hundred and four Wolfguard of House Torrent. I know you have probably heard each house is only allowed two hundred Wolfguard, but it actually fluctuates. Right now, the Miadens have two hundred and six, and the Bricios have two hundred and seven. It means I have the first choice of selection in the newest class. I can not add more than three to my household as that would bring me to two hundred and seven. If I did that then the Miadens could add more Wolfguard. It turns into a slippery slope and one thing I have been able to do in my time in the seat is keep the Trivumverate Wolfguard numbers in check.”

I understood what he was saying. It was a mutual increase of the Wolfguard by single digits among the Triumvirate. I asked, “Why do you not already have two hundred and five Wolfguard?” He looked up from the book.

“An astute question, Storme. The Torrent family lost seventeen Wolfguard in the Sadian attacks. We have replaced five recently. The other families lost a similar number, and I have greatly irritated the other two Triumvirate members by holding my family at the current number. But I am able to add one and still thwart them. That is what I am offering you, Storme,” He said with a massive smile.

I understood his plan. He was going to give me a guard that wore the Torrent colors and bind me to his house. I could see the look of disbelief on Tessa’s face. Pomare pulled out a loose piece of paper and handed it to me. On it were twenty-three names with notes on each.

The spy who handed Pomare the book spoke, “The Wolfguard are trained in groups of twenty-three. This list has the details of the upcoming group. They are not due to the Blackguard for seven months, but we can add them to the family roles immediately if requested.” There were three Wolfguard on the list circled.

The spy that had handed the list over spoke, “The three interesting ones in the class are Rollo, a male with superior speed and danger sense. Adolpha, a female with a minor awakened core and a prodigy with a two-handed axe. And Bleiz, a male Wolfguard with a modest awakened core and a penchant for stealth.”

“Forgive my ignorance, but how does it work when you assign a Wolfguard to someone outside the family? I know Admiral Sebastian Woodcraft has a Wolfguard named Nisil,” I asked while looking over the notes on each of the Wolfguard.

“Nisil? She has been working in the naval hospital since the Sadian attack at Sebastian’s direction. My father entrusted her to Sebastian. Once a Wolfguard is bonded, it is for life. If their charge dies, they either follow them or become a member of the Blackguard in the Citadel. They can not bond to another,” Pomare educated me.

“How about Loriel’s Wolfguard Gammon? He is definitely much older than her,” I asked, trying to put holes in his assertion.

“He is bonded to her grandfather still. He charged him with protecting her and will do that until he gives Gammon a different order. If you wish, I can assign you one of the Wolfguard bonded to me? I assume you want one that you know is independent and free of the influence of all the families,” Pomare stated seriously.

Tessa spoke with passion, “Storme, I don’t think you understand what an honor is being given to you.”

I didn’t want to turn down this offer I was just trying to figure out what strings were attached. Pomare added, “The three Wolfguard Alistair pointed out would typically be selected to guard a member of the family in succession order. Any of those three would make a valuable guardian for your person.”

I walked around the room with the sheet of paper. Reading and rereading the notes. “I am willing to tie myself to the Torrents, but I will need one thing in return.”

“If it is within my power, consider it done,” Pomare said with too much enthusiasm. Tessa was also smiling, and I felt bad for her because what I was about to ask was not what she was thinking.

“I wear the ring of an indentured,” I held up Aelyn’s ring. “I want her mark removed and her to be freed,” I said firmly. Tessa deflated, and Pomare looked confused. I explained, “She was captured when her mother was taken from the carnival. She was deemed innocent of her mother’s treachery but still marked for life as an indentured.”

Pomare gave his spy Alistair a look. The spy left for what I assumed was a mission to find out more. Pomare, “While we wait, have you decided on a Wolfguard?”

I had read the list numerous times, and I already knew Wolfguard with an awakened core were extremely rare. Adopha and Bleiz were the only two on this list of twenty-three. It didn’t say what a modest core was, but I assumed it would help him be a decent mage. “How much aether training do the Wolfguard get? I don’t see any notes for spells on the sheet?”

Pomare took the paper, “I believe they are only trained in the aether core exercises. Whoever their bonded is would choose which spells they would imprint.”

“How old are these Wolfguard?” I asked before making a decision.

Tessa answered, desperate to be part of the conversation, “Seventeen—or sixteen since they are months away from being assigned. Usually, the graduating group is all seventeen.” Pomare nodded and gave Tessa a smile at her knowledge.

My question was just to figure out how mature the core might be. Age twenty was the terminal age when a mage knew his core size was locked in. “The third one, Bleiz. If you can release Aelyn, I would choose Bleiz as my companion.”

“I good choice even if raising a mage is expensive.” He looked at the mithril shirt, “If you want, I would be willing to purchase that necklace from you for a dozen platinum.”

The invisibility necklace was a powerful item. I also already had plans for it after I studied it with my metal sense and artificing ability. “I am afraid I plan to keep the necklace, but I appreciate the offer.”

“Callem Dregella and Wynna Puresight already sponsor Storme. I doubt he needs much coin,” Alistair said, coming out of the shadows. He had only been gone about ten minutes and handed Pomare a piece of paper. The Torrent took it and read it and furrowed his brow. He looked up at Alistair, who nodded, confirming what he had read.

“We can release Aelyn Imudius, but we can not free her mother. Her parole will be on you. That means if she commits any crimes after her release, you will be accountable. If you are satisfied with this, we can proceed,” Pomare seemed distracted. I nodded. I wanted to see what was on the paper he had been given, but he gave it to Alistair and said, “Alistair, begin the paperwork for Bleiz,” and the paper vanished with the man.

Pomare looked thoughtful and then said, “Well, now that everything is settled, let us go and make some announcements and see how red-faced we can make the Bricios.” I picked up the dungeon essence vials, the sword, and the necklace on my way out of the room. I made a show of putting the necklace on and tucking it under my shirt but sent it to my dimensional space when it was hidden. The sword was clipped to my belt.

I fingered it while walking, exploring it with my metal sense. It was a very simple dungeon-made sword. It had a hardness rune and looked like it was designed to slay earth elementals. I would have to confirm it with Aldon Aethon when I got back to the academy in Hen’s Hollow.

We entered the large room where we had dinner a few hours ago. Now the space was filled with sofas and chairs, and maybe a third of the people who were at dinner remained. They all looked toward Pomare who climbed a small dais eager to make his pronouncements.