Chapter 84 (Arc 2 Chapter 38)

We walked with Bylura dressed in a servant’s uniform for the Miaden house.  I asked the white wolf girl, “Are you attending the Triumvirate Festival?”

As we walked, the wolf girl looked at me cautiously, “Yes, I will be Loriel’s attendant with Gammon.”  Gammon was Loriel’s only personal Wolfguard.

We walked through six security checkpoints as we moved into the Triumvirate residences within the Citadel.  The snow-white stone was polished like marble, and servants rushed up and down the corridors.  The Citadel had Wolfguard at every intersection in their pristine black uniforms.  There were 2,000 Wolfguard in the Citadel who were supposedly neutral.  They served as a peacekeeping force for the rulers of Skyholme from each other.

Bylura led us to a wing marked with the sigil of the Miaden house.  We got a lot of interested looks as we walked to Gammon, who stood guard over a large door.  He opened the door for Bylura, Gareth, and I.   There was a large ornate anteroom beyond with a few maids moving about.  Bylura indicated a door on the far side, “You can get dressed inside that room.”  Gareth and I moved inside to find a large sitting area lined with shelves.  There were more curiosities than books on the shelves.  Gareth took his satchel and took out his clothes.  I just brought my outfit forth from my storage space.

After we both dressed, we helped each other fix our hair gel.  We both wore our hair at shoulder length, and the gel would keep it from being too wavy. Gareth had some makeup, and I almost made fun of him but held my tongue. I only needed to use my *cleanliness* spell to refresh my skin.  We returned to the anteroom and found Tessa and Loriel in form-fitting dresses.  Tessa wore a sheer silk black dress to contrast with her platinum hair that cascaded down her back.  Only her neck and hands were bare.  Her jewelry was silver with white agate gemstones.

I let my jaw fall open and made to speak, “Tessa, you look to be the picturesque beauty.  I see you are not wearing a necklace.  Fortunately, I brought one for you.”  I reached into my coat pocket and pretended to search for it.  “I know it is here somewhere.”  In my other hand, I was making weaving a silver chain necklace.  It took over a minute, and I sensed she was about to tell me it was ok, but then I produced it.  It sparkled as the silver was new and pure.  I had made it without a clasp and handed it to her.

Tessa blushed on receiving it, and a smile was on her face as a maid took it from me to put on her.  Without the clasp, she had to navigate the chain over her hair.  I finally noticed Loriel, who was sporting a rich royal blue dress.  She looked ravishing as well, but I was focused on Tessa.  Gareth tried to garner some favor, “Storme, did you bring the gold necklace I got Loriel?”

Really Gareth?  I was already doing him a favor by coming to this party.  “You just told me to get her something.  I picked up a bracelet, remember?  I reached into my pocket and made a thick silver bracelet with etchings going around it of a lioness chasing down a peacock. It took me another minute to produce and hand it to Gareth.  It was also silver as I was going to conserve as much aether tonight.  I was going into what I perceived as enemy territory, after all.  The bracelet had more silver than the necklace but was not nearly as intricate.  Loriel took and turned it in her hands, inspecting it with Tessa.

“It is beautiful, Gareth, thank you,” Loriel said while sliding it on.  “The dinner will be starting soon, and we will be called to sit.”

We stood and talked in the anteroom, and Loriel explained she rarely used this apartment.  It was reserved for the 22nd in line to the Miaden seat.  Each person in the line of succession had their own apartment in the Citadel.  Each of the families had its own wing of the Citadel.   The sub-levels of the Citadel housed the 2,000 Wolfguard.

I turned down a red wine while we waited. Gareth had two glasses.  Finally, a knock came, and our escort to the dining room arrived.  Four Wolfguard in black uniforms flanked us as we were escorted to a massive room filled with tables.  We were one of the last ones to be seated, and after we were announced, we only attracted a few eyes until they saw how beautiful Tessa was in her dress.  She was definitely a polished gem. The Miaden family and Torrent family were seated on opposite sides of the room, so Gareth was on his own. I did tap him before we departed and removed his intoxication. He would probably drink more, but it was all I could do for now.

Our table had four others at it. Tessa’s brother and his date. There was also another Torrent male who appeared to be in line for a succession seat. A raised platform held the three current seats on the Triumvirate ruling council. It was my first time seeing them, but I was not impressed. I ignored all the pomp and focused on talking with Tessa.

I learned a lot about her as the food was brought out. I didn’t eat anything, partly from paranoia which was probably misplaced. Tessa had two half-sisters and a half-brother. She was the oldest. She was fifteen years old. Normally you entered the academy at fourteen, but many Triumverate families held their children back a year so they had a better chance of doing well in their first year of the academy. Due to the faster aging and longer years within the Sphere, Tessa was closer to age 19 physically.

Tessa confided that she would attend the city’s naval academy next cycle. This got a cold feeling in my spine as I knew Abaddon Bricio was still attending the academy. Midway through the meal the entertainment came out. Illusionists created lifesized battles on the center floor of men fighting beasts. It drew our attention, especially when you had things like a thirty-foot dragon snapping at a knight before you.

Finally, the meal portion of the festival was completed, and the center man on the Triumvirate platform stood and spoke. Tessa whispered it was the Bricio seat. He spoke, “Thank you for coming to honor the tradition of the *Sowing Festival*, the first planting.” I noticed not everyone in the room seemed happy as he spoke. “As is the tradition, we have gathered a role for marriages—may the blood remain strong.” Tessa whispered to me the phrase was used to justify intermarriage among the families. The first marriages he announced were for people marrying into the families not already having any links. Many of the people announced were not even present. Tessa told me these people marrying into the families most likely had powerful abilities. Since the Bricios controlled most of the readers in Skyholme, it wasn’t surprising that most marriages were to Bricios.

The next set of announcements were done in pairs. The Bricio seat and Miaden seat at the Triuverate table stood to announce a marriage between their two houses. This was usually met with some applause, sometimes some mutterings. Tessa whispered to me that this was longer than normal due to all the deaths in the navy this past year. There were a lot of widowers. I stopped paying attention and just looked around the room.

Gareth was on the far side and definitely appeared intoxicated again with his high degree of animation. Loriel, to his left, looked split between embarrassment and awkwardness. I started chuckling, and it occurred to me that Gareth might be doing me a favor by being Loriel’s escort. She definitely was not going to ask him again!

There were a lot of gasps at the most recent announcement and I leaned into Tessa and asked her why. She stated, “Argile Bricio is wedding Cheryil Bricio. Cheryil lost her husband in the Sadian attack but she is nearly 70, Argile is just 24. It is an open attempt by the Bricios to keep Cheryil estate and assets under their control. It is not an unusual thing to happen. Just the large age gap is a surprise. Cheryil was a Torrent before marrying Vennir Bricio.” I nodded. Tessa pointed at Cheryil at one of the middle tables. She sat straight-backed and stoic. The announcements continued and transitioned to formal requests for marriage.

Tessa whispered to me, “When someone makes a request of me, just stand when I do, and I will announce my intention to not wed this year.” I nodded and thought things would go smoothly. Loriel had five requests to marry, and every time Gareth hastily stood with her, he rattled the table to the amusement of everyone and Loriel’s continued embarrassment. I caught a grin on Gareth’s face and realized he was doing it intentionally. His whole charade—he winked at me on the most recent refusal by Loriel.

No one made a request for Tessa, and I thought that was odd. She was clearly the most desirable young woman here, at least by looks. When Abaddon stood from amid the tables in the middle, I felt a cold chill of anger go through me. He started with a clear and masculine voice, “It is with the blessing of my father and her father that I propose a harmony agreement with Loriel Miaden.”

Tessa leaned into me and explained, “A unison pact is just a long-winded way of asking for a date. Loriel is the wealthiest person here who is not married. Everyone knows Abaddon is a terrible person and only after her wealth.”

Once again, Loriel stood and declined with a clearly intoxicated Gareth at her side. Abbadon then spoke, “I ask to face your champion for the honor then.” The whole room went silent.

Tessa leaned into me, “It is an old custom. A battle to first blood. No one invokes it, as it is seen as being petty. Not surprising Abaddon would try. It would be a major slap in the face if she didn’t give him this.”

Loriel had to restrain Gareth as she declined even the right of combat to spend time with Abaddon. Abaddon put on an amused look, except his eyes definitely emitted hatred. He sat and leaned to talk with someone who appeared to be his younger brother. His younger brother stood and faced our table, “With the blessing of my father, I ask Tessa Torrent for a harmony agreement.” The young man looked smug in his pronouncement. A lot of anger murmurings could be heard among the Torrent tables. I recalled Tessa’s branch of the Torrent family had a feud with the Bricios.

Tessa stood and froze as I joined her. It took her a moment to regain herself, and I suspected maybe a spell had been cast, but she finally said, “I decline to associate with you or your family.”

A massive grin emerged on his face, “That sounds awfully close to besmirching my family’s name.” I looked at Tessa and could see sweat trickling down her next. I didn’t understand what was happening.

Tessa was quiet before she finally forced out the words, “Your family has no honor.” A massive eruption of gasps and talking erupted, but the young man just smiled like this had been expected. The sweat was beading on Tessa’s brow, and I was uncertain what I should do.

As if inclined to accept it the Bricio sighed heavily, “Then I guess I must request an honor duel to appease my family’s honor.” More gasps and louder talking. The Torrent side of the room seemed extremely angry, and the Torrent Triumverate seat stood at his table.

He bellowed, “Baladan Bricio, this is not the forum or place for such a pronouncement. I decline your request of challenging my granddaughter’s slander.” I could already sense something was amiss. Tessa was still sweating and seemed statue-like. Then the three members of the Triumvirate convened, and the Bricio member stood.

He announced with a masked grin, “It has been decided in a 2-1 vote to allow the challenge.” There were some angry shouts as decorum started to break between the Bricio and Torrent tables.

Baladan smiled at the obviously expected pronouncement. He focused on Tessa, and who will be your champion? Tessa’s hand was slowly coming up, and I could see she was going to point at her brother. This was all orchestrated to get her brother into an honor duel. It had nothing to do with me. I moved to the other side of Tessa to put myself between Tessa and her half-brother. As her hand raised, she was pointing at me and was clearly sweating. She was obviously under outside influence, and I didn’t understand how it wasn’t obvious to everyone in the room.

When her finger reluctantly pointed, I spoke, “Well, I guess that’s me. I get to fight you? Can we go right now? I hope you make it a bit of a challenge.” The room erupted in a cacophony of voices, and Baladan and Abaddon looked angry at my intrusion into their plans. I don’t know why I did it. Well, I did know. I wanted to impress Tessa and rescue her from this obvious trap.

The three Triumvirate seats took time to get order restored, and I could tell the seats had little respect from the other houses. The political landscape of Skyholme looked awfully dire to me from this brief window into its operations. Tessa finally relaxed and used me for support. Whatever had been influencing her had expired or stopped.

There was a lot of talking going on, and Tessa regained enough of herself to speak to me, “Storme, you shouldn’t have done that. You challenged Baladan directly. My grandfather could have defused the situation.”

I shrugged my shoulders, “It should be fine.” I wasn’t overly concerned. Even if I lost the fight, it was just to first blood, and the Torrent family losing some honor wouldn’t affect me much.

Tessa sat as the discussion raged around us and sat with her. Tessa said, “It is an honor duel, Storme. When you accepted, you allowed Baladan to set the guidelines. He will get to choose the victory conditions, what weapons can be used, where and when it will occur.” I felt a coldness run along my spine.

I asked, “And by victory conditions, you mean it could be something other than first blood?”

Tessa looked me in the eyes and said, “Yes.”