Chapter 85 (Arc 2 Chapter 39)

My mind started to process how I could get out of this.  I could see Loriel explaining what was happening to Gareth, and I could see his intoxication vanish.  He was clearly angry, and Loriel was doing her best to keep him calm.  This was Gareth’s fault—no, it was Loriel’s—maybe a little bit of mine.  The three Triumvirate members were discussing how to proceed with the Torrent member clearly agitated and angry.

Well, he probably was not as concerned now that I had stepped in the line of fire.  I asked Tessa calmly, “So what caused you to speak as you did?  Were you controlled?  Can you voice that you were being manipulated?”

She looked down, “I think it was something in the food.  Not an outside influence.  It made me speak my mind, some type of powerful truth potion.”  She looked apologetic.

“So what is the play here by the Bricios?” I asked, seeing them grinning at their table even though I had interrupted their plans.

She seemed to consider, “I think they want to prevent my brother from assuming the 23rd seat of the Torrent family.” After some thought, she added, “It wouldn’t have worked. My grandfather would have let my uncle step down, and my brother to assume the 23rd seat. It would have been six years early, but my uncle would have received compensation. Those in line for succession can always order someone to stand in for them in duels.”

I mulled over my mistake. Well, it wasn’t like I had read the manual of how to be a lord in Skyholme. I cycled my mind exercises to remain focused, “What can you tell me about Baladon? Will he fight me?” I asked Loriel.

She seemed to consider before answering, “He will only fight you if he is certain he will win. He is in his third year at the Mage Academy and has been given dungeon essences to increase his abilities. He fought in the pre-Acadmey Annuals four years ago and came in second, so he is a competent swordsman, but he has been focused on his magic. He may be rusty,” she offered with a half-hearted smile. “He has an affinity for fire magic and likes to put on showy displays.”

“What type of person is he? Is he like his older brother Abaddon?” I asked while making eye contact with him.

Tessa followed my gaze, “He is not as cruel as his older brother. At least not publicly. I would say he is smarter and more calculating. I think this plan probably has more depth than we are seeing.”

I swore to myself. I had been careful stepping around Loriel and her piles of shit. But once a pretty woman put herself before me, I blindly walked straight into it. We were being summoned to the Triuverate table, probably considered an honor on most occasions. Well, I could always tell my parents I met the ruling council tonight if I lived through this. A privacy screen was assembled around Tessa, Baladon, the Triumvirate, and myself. It was the Bricio Triumvirate who spoke.

“Nephew, since it is your honor that has been trodden upon, what do you seek as restitution?” He already had a knowing smile on his face.

Baladon smiled, “I have nothing but respect for Tessa Torrent. So much so I am willing to forgo this duel if she accepts my marriage proposal. May the blood remain strong,” he added snarkily. He already knew the Torrent seat, and Tessa would not agree, and the Torrent member of the Triumvirate spoke.

“Not acceptable. I will offer you the apple orchards east of the city to settle this issue,” He said with a hardness in his voice. Tessa gasped, and Baladon seemed surprised by this and considered the offer.

Baladon considered for a few breaths but reluctantly shook his head no, “That will not be enough. I am afraid I will have to ask for a duel,” smugness was now written all over his face.

The Bricio Triuverate member smiled gleefully and interjected, “And what are your terms, nephew?”

Baladon bowed to the three and spoke, “I know Tessa’s champion has magic, as he registered spells in the pre-Academy Annuals this year. So I wish a mage’s duel till one of us yields or is killed.”

The Bricio Triumverate said, “That sounds very fair of you.”

The Torrent seat interjected, “It is not! Damn you, Otieno! Baladon has three years at the mage academy under his belt. This common boy fought with a staff at the Annuals, not spells!”

“Pomare, calm down,” Otieno Bricio said with a terrible smile. “I am sure Baladon will allow blades as well. But only blades and armor he currently owns.” I was quiet up until this point, not wanting to interject.

I asked, “So Baladon is going to fight me? What if I kill him by mistake?” I tried to sound confident. The three members of the Triumvirate looked at each, shocked at my question. If I could sow enough doubt in Baladon, maybe he would back out of the fight.

Otieno Brico laughed, “Boy, if Baladon falls to you, then it is his own folly. He is setting the rules of engagement.”

It was obvious no one had much confidence in me. I was four years younger than Baladon. They continued talking, ignoring me as Tessa squeezed my hand and whispered that she was sorry. I was just thinking of a way to ensure my victory. My biggest worry was Baladon would discover what spells I had imprinted before the duel. I paid close attention, trying to figure out the dynamics of the ruling Three. It appeared the Miaden seat was in the pocket of the Otieno Bricio, as he just agreed with everything Otieno proposed. Well, maybe not in the pocket, but disinterested. Maybe he was getting concessions for going along with this farce.

Pomare Torrent was clearly on Tessa’s side, but he had drawn a line on how far he would support me in the contest. I guessed orchards just outside of the capital were extremely valuable, and it had almost enticed Baladon to drop the duel. I was obviously not of his house and just Tessa’s escort tonight. Baladon seemed overconfident and tried to rub as much salt into the wound as possible.

The final conditions of the duel of honor, if you could call it that, were swords only, along with any spells the individual had imprinted. The duel was to when the first combatant conceded the match after taking at least one injury from the other party. So I couldn’t just concede when the match started. The duel would be in four days which was not a point I wanted to concede. If I had to fight, then my advantage was to have the duel immediately, given Baladon no time to do a thorough background on me.

I tried to push toward an immediate resolution, “Lord Otieno, we already have an audience assembled who has witnessed the slight to the honor. Wouldn’t it be better to get it over with this very evening? That is unless Baladon is fearful he might lose and needs to prepare further?”

Baladon finally looked slightly unsure of himself. Otieno was considering my words and ignoring the uncertainty on his nephew’s face. He finally said, “How does the council vote? It would make for a cap to an entertaining evening.” I nodded affirmatively at Pomare Torrent.

Pomare said, “If that is what the boy wishes, then I will agree.”

The Miaden seat was quiet, so Otieno was the deciding vote, “Yes, a most enjoyable end to the evening.” The privacy screen dropped, and Otieno addressed the room, “It has been decided that this duel of honor will proceed. It will be a battle of magic and blades! We will have our post-dinner beverages in the Audience Chamber while these two young men settle the discord between the Torrent and Bricio houses!”

Tessa walked with me as we moved deeper into the older parts of the Citadel. Tessa explained, “The Audience Chamber was where the Haikuram met to discuss politics. They were a democratic society, and the chamber houses up to twelve thousand, but it is only used for private sport by the nobles now.” The Haikuram were the avian race that ruled Skyholme when it was one single large island.

We came up a ramp into a brightly lit domed chamber. My eyes were drawn to the light source in the center of the ceiling. It was suspended by large silver chains wrapped in runic script. The light source was a large glowing purple gem, no, it was violet, a violet aether stone nearly three feet in diameter! It must be worth a massive fortune!

Seeing my eyes focus, Tessa said, “That is the Heart Stone. It is an aether stone that powers the enchantments that protect Skyholme from teleportation. As long as that array is powered, no one can sneak into the islands.” I wanted to contest that since I had seen Sadian ships using invisibility during the attack, but the suspended stone entranced me.

When I had my fill of the stone, I looked around the rest of the ceiling as there were many standard white aether lights adding to the lumination of the chamber. The large chamber was circular. It looked like an amphitheater with tiered seating going up at least 70 rows. The floor was covered in white marble veined with gold, and I could make out various large silver circles that were encompassed with runes, probably tied to the anti-teleportation rune. The tiered seating was bench style but was segmented with rainbow-patterned seating. The color followed the rainbow but was pale in color and not ostentatious, more an artistic effort.

The closest seats were being filled while servants brought drinks for this evening’s entertainment. Still looking up, I noticed there were massive murals painted on large panels along the ceiling. The panels were artistically impressive and lifelike. They depicted avian humanoid beings in various actions. There were battles showing triumphs and tragedies. The most catching one was of the avians battling a large black dragon with silver streaks throughout its scaled body. Another mural appeared to show the breaking of the island. A wizard who appeared villainous in his depiction was casting a spell above the island, and the island was breaking apart. That must have been the wizard who shattered the island.

Tessa confirmed my guess, “The Haikarum wizard Kurota attempted to draw the power from the ley lines of the sphere up to the island. His hubris destroyed the island and shattered his people.” I looked at Tessa, who was studying the murals as well. The nobles apparently had a much broader education than I was privy to.

Standing on the floor of the chamber, I looked for Baladon. I thought he would have been with us, but I didn’t see him. Tessa offered, “I am guessing his family is equipping him with items to help him win. As soon as you receive an injury, concede defeat, Storme. My only loss of honor will be spending time with Baladon.”

I didn’t like the thought of that happening. “So if I kill him before he concedes defeat, what consequences will there be for me?” Tessa didn’t seem to share my optimism from her pained expression but gave me a thoughtful answer.

“If you killed Baladon, you would draw his brother’s ire. Abaddon is a spiteful person,” she warned. “The entire Bricio family, for that matter.” I nodded, taking in the wisdom.

There was a quick illusion show while the spectators got comfortable. I found Gareth, Loriel, and Bylura sitting in the stands with four Wolfguard behind them. I guessed that maybe Gareth hadn’t been overly cooperative. At least Loriel looked upset at my plight next to Gareth’s furious gaze. Pomare Torrent was showing obvious anger as he talked with members of his house. I noticed on the upper seating the Wolfguard had situated themselves at intervals, easily over five hundred in the black uniforms. These must be the neutral Wolfguard for maintaining peace.

Otieno Bricio was sipping a red wine and talking with Abaddon and three other Bricios I didn’t recognize. There were all clearly confident in the outcome of the match. Most of the rest of the crowd just seemed anxious for a spectacle.

Finally, Baladon joined me on the floor with a Wolfguard attendant. Baladon was wearing a fine weave mesh. The color and the way the light hit it told me it was mithril. He had a simple long sword on his belt as well. I used my assess person ability on him.

*Baladon Bricio*

*Human Male*

*Age 18*

*Disposition: Hatred*

His gait told me he was a competent swordsman. A Wolfguard came with a weapons rack since I hadn’t brought a sword. I eyed the handle of Baladon’s long sword, and the aether stone it in the hilt confirmed his blade was enchanted. All the swords I was being offered were just good quality weapons. I took an oversized scimitar. The hilt was long enough to use two-handed. I could have pulled my falchion from my dimensional space, but I thought it best to keep my space secret.

Soon Tessa was headed to the stands, and she went and sat with her grandfather and the other Torrents. She was unhappy and clearly showing remorse for the situation I had been put in. The Wolfguard, who had brought the swords for me to select from, showed me where to stand on the floor. When Baladon and I were both situated, the crowd went quiet, and a loud gong rang.

Baladon stood thirty paces away and looked smug. He started with a small fist-sized fireball that zipped toward me. I managed to evade the fast-moving flame. He started peppering me was additional fireballs that moved as fast as baseball. I didn’t sense a lot of heat or destructive power in them, and I could tell he was just entertaining the crowd and keeping me at a distance. This spell had a low cost of aether and was just a flashy display. Tessa had told me he liked to show off.

I tuned out the crowd and focused on my opponent. We both were at a disadvantage as we didn’t know what the other had in their repertoire of spells. I was going to hold my *lightning reflexes* spell in reserve. For now, I needed to figure out his offensive options and be prepared to defend. I summoned two dice into my offhand as I moved and cast my alarm spell on them. The trigger would be them hitting the ground, and both would flash and make a loud sound. I had an evolution that would protect me from the flash, but my opponent would not. After his seventh mini fireball, his expression changed. It seemed he was done playing to the crowd.

He changed his spell to a fire arrow, a tier 2 spell that he had obviously greatly increased the speed of with his evolutions. The speed of the first arrow caught me completely off guard as it zipped into my chest and burned my chest with a minor splash effect. The intense flair of pain caused me to throw my dice. I added an aether shield from the waist up. A second fire arrow hit my aether shield as the dice landed, but I was already healing myself. The fire arrow had enough impact to take out my aether shield, but I quickly added another in its place.

Baladon was taken by surprise as he watched the dice land 10 feet in front of him and flash. He had been staring at the dice and was unprepared for the effect. If he didn’t have a healing spell, he would be blinded. The crowd didn’t fare much better. There were mages surrounding the area for protection, but they had not expected my flash effect or booming sound either.

I raced forward as Baladon struggled to orient himself. He was panicked and summoned a vial to his hand. It must have been a healing potion. I wouldn’t be able to close the distance in time to stop him from drinking it. I almost activated my *lighting reflexes* but held off. There were too many people in the stands that I didn’t want to be aware of this capability of mine. He must have sensed me rushing him because a fire ring burst from around his body. It was a tier 3 fire spell called *fire halo*. The wave shattered my aether shield, and I shielded my eyes as I was thrown back and activated my thermostatic aura to try and suffocate the flames destroying my expensive clothes. I recovered quickly and moved to engage with the sword.

Baladon had consumed the potion and was blinking his vision back as my smoldering body got within five feet of him. My aether shield had been destroyed again, so I recast it. He was surprised I had managed to get so close, and Baladon suddenly disappeared. Taking a chance, it was an invisibility spell or item. I went into a slide and swung the sword one-handed in a big arc. I connected with something, and my blade had a faint crimson line on it when I returned to my feet. I continued to ignore the raucous crowd, tracking the drops of blood appearing on the floor to orient myself to Baladon. I doubled up my aether shield in his direction.

If he healed again, I would lose my means of tracking him. I took two steps in his direction, and my fears were realized when the blood drops disappeared. I quickly cast a third aether shield to form an arc in front of me. A large 30 foot column of flame splashed into the shield on my left, quickly destroying it. I was protected just long enough to roll away from the continuous flame. Baladon was standing there winded when the flame stopped, his invisibility spell disrupted by his attack. He was shocked I was standing unharmed. He was sweating profusely, and it looked like he might be close to running out of aether. That flame jet spell might have been the tier 4 *dragon’s breath* spell. No, the heat wasn’t intense enough. It was probably a tier 3 version of the spell.

I was able to reestablish my arc of aether shields and started walking toward him. He drew his long sword and took a defensive stance. He was definitely low on aether, but I wasn’t going to be fooled into believing he was empty.

He tested my aether shield with a mini-fireball and frowned. I could see his mind turning. I was now completely healed, and had a defense against his ranged attacks, and he still didn’t know all my tricks. I could end this in seconds if I went into overdrive with my *lightning reflexes* spell, but I felt confident I wouldn’t have to. I engaged him with my aether shields and scimitar. He was an excellent swordsman but had significant fatigue. On our first exchange, he destroyed one of my aether shields but suffered a slash to his thigh. He was already retreating and imbibing another healing potion.

I knew fighting against my aether shields was frustrating. They were essentially invisible, and there was no dirt to kick up to highlight them. That was how Elora and Elijah dealt my aether shields. They kicked up enough dust to highlight them. Baladon found a similar approach as he retreated. A low aether cost spark spell. It cast a shower of sparks that did no damage but highlighted my shields for him. He frowned deeply when he realized I was able to manifest three separate shields. I just grinned at his depressed visage. He gathered himself and attacked with his blade. His next attack almost got within my guard, and he gained some confidence and started pressing me.

He definitely wasn’t rusty with his sword practice. He tried to mix in a fire arrow, but I recognized the hand gesture and rolled away in plenty of time. The speed of those fire arrows made them difficult to dodge, and I planned to increase the speed of my lightning spear in the future. I smiled as his eyes seemed somewhat sunken. His aether was definitely close to bottoming out.

I tried to get him to concede by holding up my sword and indicating the now-dried blood on the blade, “I believe I have injured you. That means you can concede if you wish, correct?”

I had spoken in a mocking tone, and this spurned him on. His calculating nature was overridden by anger. I would say we were matched equally as swordsmen. Maybe he even had a slight advantage. Unfortunately, I had my aether shields, and even his sparkles were fading as his aether pool bottomed out. When he learned he could temporarily destroy my aether shield with enough damage, he spent his energy attacking them to try and engage me directly. I made him pay with his somewhat reckless attacks with numerous cuts.

Baladon seemed to have endless healing potions in his dimensional space. He would retreat and drink another potion whenever I got a serious strike. I was guessing these potions were all from the same batch. Otherwise, he would be vomiting all over the place as they interacted in his stomach. That was a danger with potions. You couldn’t mix them, so you had to wait for them to completely metabolize before switching to another type.

His frustration grew as we danced across the floor, now speckled with blood. I was almost certain he would have some type of aether restorative potion in his bag but couldn’t use it since he had already used a healing potion. He stumbled on an engagement, and I grappled his mithril chain shirt and used my metal shaping skill to tear it. The chain shirt hand had been protecting his chest, and it now flapped helplessly, exposing his heart. He was shocked the vest had been damaged but even more so at being exposed. Slashes on his arms and legs were one thing—a piercing strike to his heart was another.

He gawked at the damage I had done to the mithril shirt and seemed uncertain about whether to continue. His face soured. But Tessa said he was smart. I was not fatigued at all. He should be able to see where this was headed. He tossed his sword to the ground and announced to the crowd, “I concede.” The look of hatred on his face told me he was not going to let go of this embarrassment. I was even more grateful I had kept a few spells in reserve.

I tuned back into the crowd, and gasps of surprise, cheers, and boos rang down. Some people were still recovering from the blinding flash of my spell as mages were still walking among them and healing. I noticed Nisil, Sebastian’s Wolfguard healer, among them. Sebastian was not in the stands, though. Nisil had also not been with Sebastian when I had visited him. Maybe, like the *Wind Splitter*, she was called into service of the Skyholme for her healing prowess.

I scanned the crowd. I had definitely drawn a lot of attention today. Gareth was fist-pumping in the stands, but the four Wolfguard remained behind him. I wouldn’t have been surprised if he had tried to join me on the floor a few times during the fight. The *fire halo* spell was the only time I was in any danger. If that spell’s blast had knocked me out or if the aether shield hadn’t muted the fire wave, I might have lost the fight.

When everything died down, I could see the three Triumvirate seats coming to the floor with Tessa in tow. Pomore Torrent had a grin on his face, Otieno Bricio looked like he was choking, and the Miaden seat looked smug at the disgrace the Bricios had just suffered. I held my face neutral as they approached but almost grinned when I saw Tessa’s beaming face. It was time for the judgment to be announced.