Chapter 52 (Arc 2 Chap 6) Misguided Guile

The ship landed in the upper city, giving us an easier walking route to the Colosseum.  The streets were packed and excitement was in the air.  A lot of talks were about the Annuals tomorrow for the post-academy group, the elite fighters.  There were 16 participants left as they had started with 64.  Tickets to see those finals were 50 silver. I already heard Gareth trying to convince Callem to stay another day so he could watch those matches.

We were given a different room by Callem’s friend this time and he winked as he left us.  I had been smart and brought a satchel this time.  That way I could reach in and withdraw items from my dimensional closet.  I ignored the appetizing food on the tables and retrieved some mixed nuts and a skin full of red juice.  I took a sip and passed the skin to Gareth who drained it.  He shrugged when he handed it back to me.  I had a water skin in my space and one cask of red juice.  I would have to fill my juice skin at another time.

“Stormy let’s bet who wins their match quicker.  Let’s say 2 gold,” Gareth suggested.

“Sure Gareth I bet 2 gold that you finish first,” I said smugly. His frown made me realize he got my twist.  It was probably the fourth or fifth time I tried to pull the same trick.  It only worked the first time.

“Never mind,” Gareth mumbled.

Callem finally arrived with his fighter intel. He had a spring in his set and came to me first, “Storme you have an interesting opponent.  He wields a bastard sword and goes from one to two-handed style freely. He has solid skills but lacks speed.  You can just keep your distance and whittle away at him. He should be a similar opponent as Gareth but not as fast.”  I was trying to think of a good way to lose.  I didn’t want to get injured too badly so I would engage him and get a read on him first.

Callem was finishing up with Gareth who looked excited.  I pulled out the water skin and drank.  I went and laid down on the couch and put my staff next to me and rubbed my hand along the smooth black wood.  I think I fell asleep as Callem shook me awake.  “Storme, Gareth just left.  You should stretch and center yourself.”  Callem then also left to watch Gareth fight.  My mental exercises had progressed and I assumed the clarity I had gotten from them had contributed to my jump in skill with the staff. We hadn’t progressed to focusing through pain yet but I knew that was just around the corner. Callem had been busy preparing the barracks for the academy so my training in this aspect had faltered.

A light knock on my door a short time later surprised me.  It was too quick from Callem’s departure for my own call to fight.  I cautiously went and opened the door.  A small female Wolfguard stood on the other side.  She had a brilliant white fur coat.  “Master Storme Hardlight. I have a message requiring a reply.”  Her voice was very soft and silky for having a slight muzzle.  I was shocked by her appearance but she was patiently waiting for me.

Finally, I said, “Yes you can relay your message.”  The Wolfguard had the mark of the Miaden family on her tight-fitting and expensive-looking outfit. The Miaden’s were responsible for commerce in Skyholme but Callem had lectured us that they were pretty much under the thumb or Bricio’s.

“My mistress wishes for you to lose your match. She will pay you 10 platinum to do so,” The young Wolfguard stated. If I hadn’t had access to unlimited wealth this offer might be tempting. But then again I was planning to lose anyway. I rolled the thought in my mind before replying.

“My counter-offer is the 10 platinum and a small favor. The favor will not be anything grand. Just help in buying some property in a city,” I stated. The Wolfguard looked uncomfortable. She probably wasn’t able to negotiate. “You should hurry back and get an answer I expect to be called shortly.” She turned and sped away.

She returned ten minutes later with a small bag and handed it to me, “It is agreed.” She turned to leave and I dropped the new coin into my dimensional space.

“Who is your mistress?” I asked curiously.

“Loriel Handram Miaden,” the Wolfguard bowed and rushed away. Handram Miaden was the son of the current ruling members of the Triumvirate. So I guessed this must be his daughter. I wished I had paid slightly more attention to the genealogy charts of the Triumvirate. Since Loriel had a Wolfsguard it either meant she was one of the 23 in the line of succession or her grandfather on the council really favored her. Each family only had 200 personnel Wolfguard to command. Most patrolled their residence according to Callem and the remainder served as companions for important family members. Typically the sitting member of the Triumvirate had twenty-three personnel guards that he was allowed to bring into the council. I remembered that last bit because I noted if I ever saw anyone walking with twenty-three Wolfguard around him I was to make haste in the other direction.

Gareth returned a few moments later and looked tired but wore a cheeky grin. “Storme you are up after the next match! I won handily and I can't wait for you to join me in the final four! Can you…” He indicated my satchel and I pulled out a roast beef sandwich on cheese bread with spicy mayo. Not Gareth’s preferred sandwich but it was mine. He consumed it in short order.

He regaled me with the tale of his most recent victory while I stretched and limbered up. I guessed his match was not as close as he was making it sound but dominating your opponent doesn’t make for a good tale. With a sharp knock and an announcement, I was to make my way to the arena floor.

I clasped arms with Gareth and headed out with my preferred staff. My opponent looked old, maybe 20 from my old world. He had decided to drop the soft leather armor most participants used in favor of some stiffer leather. This would be more effective against my blunt weapon but it didn’t really matter. I tuned out the announcer as he drolled on and the two of us faced off. I just studied the man opposite me.

He seemed slightly nervous and his eyes said he was apprehensive about engaging. When the announcer finished the man was already in a defensive stance with two hands on his bastard sword. It was massive and heavy. I was surprised he could wield it one-handed. Right now though he had two hands on it giving him a pivot point to leverage the blade quicker.

I went after him with a sequence and watched him block aptly. When he didn’t press after the exchange the crowd booed. I needed him to attack so increased my tempo and chained some attacks together, he defended well and I only got two glancing blows. But something was wrong. I paused. Could he have been paid to lose as well? That seemed ridiculous.

But his lack of an offense or any probing attempts made me more and more certain. I had to get bribed because my opponent had been bribed as well. My next sequence targeted his blade. If he wasn’t going to fight me then I would make it appear he was, directly slamming my staff into his blade.

At least the crowd loved it. I was sure any staff masters or blade masters in the stands would see through my farce of attacks but it was all I could do. I had committed to losing this match but I wanted it to appear like I tried extremely hard.

Finally, I got him to give a weak thrust and moved the tip enough to strike and get a glance on my shoulder, creating a sizable cut and a steady flow of blood. I pretended outrage as I stepped back and healed the wound and then used my cleanliness spell to clean my clothes, leaving no evidence other than a slice on my heavy canvas shirt. I stepped back into him, twilling my staff for the enjoyment of the screaming crowd.

I went through a long and varied sequence that would make Elora proud. Except for the fact that every time I connected with my opponent I pulled the strike to minimize the damage. He was completely on the defensive now. It took him a few moments to realize that he was not taking much damage when I connected. He started to understand my intentions. Now we both knew we planned to let the other win. The panic in his face told me he couldn’t allow himself to win for whatever reason.

It caused me to panic a little as well so I stupidly deflected his blade thrust into my stomach during a poor lunge on his part. There were a half dozen healing mages present so I expected this would end the match and it looked like I had just made a slight mistake, not deflecting the blade completely across my body.

Now I had been in a few life-or-death situations from injuries in the past. This was a bit weird allowing myself to be impaled. I was in shock and shortly after followed the pain. I immediately went to my knees as the entire crowd went silent. My opponent didn’t know what to do so he slowly withdrew the sword. I was surprised as I maintained eye contact with him. I could feel the hole filling with bile and blood. I went and focused on mending my internal damage. I would have to tell Callem I was able to use my healing while being in extreme pain. Maybe it would make him not be upset with me for intentionally losing.

This hadn’t been my plan. I had planned to take a few glancing strikes, heal up, pretend to be out of aether and then tap out after taking another light injury when I realized I couldn’t heal. Unfortunately, I read that my opponent planned to end the match sooner so I took drastic action.

I shot my fist into the air and opened it, this signaled to the moderators that I was conceding. There was shock still going through the crowd. I had dominated my opponent throughout and I was just quitting. My organs were healed enough that I wasn’t worried but I didn’t close the gaping wound in my belly. I let the healing mages rush and heal me and help me off the arena floor as slowly cheers rained down for the victor. He was still stunned, standing there looking at the sword that had betrayed him and won him the match.

Whatever penalty he would have to endure for winning instead of losing was his cross to bear. I was led by the mages down a different corridor…the loser’s corridor. The room I was left in was rather plain compared to the competitor's room. A man dressed in heavy ornate robes entered.

“Storme Hardlight. Congratulations on your performance in the pre-Annual tournament. I am here to give you your reward for making it to the top 8,” he fished into his robe and pulled out a bag, and left it on the table with a chink of coins. He looked at a parchment and spoke, “Seventeen gold, 73 silver and 40 copper coins. Well, thank you for participating.” His words seemed completely disingenuine. Before he could leave I asked a question.

“Lord, what will the winner get?” Callem hadn’t told us what prize money we would receive.

The lord or magistrate seemed a little peeved but did look at his parchment and told me, “Eight large golds and one dungeon essence. Lord Holland will decide what the essence will be.” He made an irritated gesture at me.

“Can I leave?” I asked not letting him go just yet.

“Your mentor or sponsor will come and escort you to the stands,” he said. I waved him away as I had no more questions. I now had to wait for Callem. I started preparing responses to the questions I knew he would ask.

A soft knock came at my door and I opened it to find the small white-furred Wolfguard there, “My mistress wishes to meet with you.” She moved aside and a short young woman in a black and deep purple hooded cloak entered.

Rich, silky black hair cascaded around her shoulders. She was a head shorter than me and had a beautiful heart-shaped face. The woman introduced herself, “I am Loriel Miaden and wanted to thank you in person for losing for me. I had a bet with a Bricio on who would win your match and had been informed your opponent was paid to lose. That is why I took such drastic measures. Your match was entertaining and it was clear you could have defeated your opponent so I came to apologize in person for asking you to do so for my benefit.” She motioned to her Wolfguard but I was already smitten with her golden brown eyes.

Something in my aether core though told me she was trying to influence our interaction. The Wolfguard produced another coin pouch and handed it to me. Loriel continued, “I would like you to make you an offer. I will be your sponsor for whatever academy you wish to attend in return I will only ask for 10 years of service after you graduate.”

Who wouldn’t want to work for such a beautiful and charming young woman? Maybe she would even invite me to her bed. She was so charming and… I realized the trap. I started to draw on my focusing exercises to clear my mind. This innocent-looking young woman was a pit viper in disguise. As my mind cleared she started to look confused since I hadn’t agreed immediately. She smiled, “Well aren’t you just full of surprises. Excellent mental fortitude. Don’t be angry with me. I was using a tier 1 ability *persuasion* on you. It wouldn’t have let you do something you really didn’t want to do.”

She was so unapologetic for her actions that I hardened myself to just get my perk from completing her request and then cutting all ties with this woman. “Loriel you promised me a favor and I wish to collect,” I said evenly. “I wish to purchase a large inn in Aegis city. Something decent in an area of the city near the skyship docks.”

Confusion clouded her face. I supplied, “You are of the Miaden family, the commerce faction. So you can help smooth my transaction.” Awareness spread on her face.

“A large inn? Aegis city? I have visited the city a few times. I am just the 22nd in line for the seat so I am not sure how much sway I hold but I can ask my uncle. He is responsible for land transactions in Aegis.” She looked at me again slightly upset. Probably because I hadn’t succumbed to her charm.

I handed her back the pouch she had given me without looking at it. “I will pay for the property completely. I just need you to grease the wheels as I don’t want to be beholden to anyone. I will find the property myself as well and send you a message. Uh, how do I send you a message?”

Loriel stepped back and looked me up and down again. “I don’t know what game you are playing Storme. Inns are not profitable. It would take you years to recoup your investment.” She took a breath, “But it is a small favor relatively speaking for my family connections.” Mentally I relaxed. I was afraid she was going to ask me for something else. A devilish smile overcame her, “In return for this favor I want one of the rooms to always be reserved for me in perpetuity. If I perish then you can rent the room out to someone else. But until that day I will always be welcome to stay at your inn.” She seemed to be plotting something in her head which suddenly made me wary. “My companion here will stay with you and you can send her to me when you find the property you wish to purchase.” A look of shock came to the Wolfguard’s face but she hid it quickly.

Loriel finished the conversation by stating, “No contract is necessary, my word is good.” I thought to voice an objection but held my tongue.

Kicking myself for my own curiosity I asked anyway, “What was the bet that I helped you win?”

An amused Loriel grinned, “It was for letting Abaddon to escort me to the Triumvirate ball. He has been trying to maneuver herself to get me a marriage. You may know him, he has assaulted various navy cadets, including your friend Cilia.” My heart paused before resuming. Don’t get involved in politics Storme was ringing in my head over and over.

While I was still computing the effect my actions had had she leaned in and gave me a peck on my cheek and left. Another Wolfguard in the corridor fell in behind her. This one was an old and grizzled brut. I looked at the small white one left behind and gave a half smile.

I wasn’t skilled in reading the facial expressions of the Wolfguard but the woman just shook her head. He soft and somewhat melodic voice filled the room, “I thought you had been smart boy. You do realize why Loriel left me to shadow you and carry a message to her? Everyone knows I am attached to Loriel. Now by seeing me with you they will think you are now attached to her. She has casually drawn you in. You will be nothing but a temporary shield against Abaddon.”

A cold chill went down my spine. “Why are you are telling me this? Isn't this a betrayal of your mistress?” I asked looking over at the young wolf woman.

“I am not a Wolfguard you idiot. Do I look like a Wolfguard with large muscles and weapons? I am just Loriel’s playmate. We grew up together and I have been waiting on her ever since,” she said with no malice. “I wouldn’t harm her but I also hate how she manipulates people to her own ends, she seemed finished with her mini rant.

“So don’t follow me then.” I pulled out my prize money from the pre-Annuals and handed it to her. “Go and stay in Aegis. I should be there tomorrow with my teacher Callem.” The whitewolf woman seemed to thin and then nodded. I will be in the *Lyrical Nymph*, it is a tavern near the primary docks in the city.

“What is your name?” I asked as she was leaving.

“Bylura,” she said with some surprise I had asked her name. “It means white storm in wolfkin speech,” she added with a smirk. Then she was gone.

I didn’t have to wait long before Callem arrived, “Storme I was detained at the end of the corridor. Is there anything wrong? Is that why you through the match?” concern laced his voice. He was looking me over for injuries but they had been long sice healed.

“I am fine. And yes I was paid to throw the match as was my opponent. I foolishly let me self get trapped in the web of politics,” I said moroasly. Callem had listened intently and then spoke.

“You did well sending the wolfkin away. Being seen with her would probably draw eyes to you. The Miaden’s hold so little power these days as most of their upper tier members have been tied to the Bricio’s by marriage. A Loriel and Abddon is just another chain.” Callem sat and looked thoughtful.

He finally looked at me, “You did the right thing taking the coin. A boy like you turning down 10 platinum may have drawn more attention than was warranted. As for your plans to build an adventuring team in Aegis…the death toll from the attack was heavy there. I inquired today in the stands from some friends and there are some decent opportunities. I assume you plan to attend your following years of academy there instead of the capital?” He asked with knowing eyes.

Callem was insightful, “Yes. I don’t want to go near the capital even if they have better academies. So I was considering the Aegis Adventuring Academy or the Enchanter’s Academey. I really wanted to attend the Mage Academy in the capital but that seems too dangerous. The Aegis Adeventuring Academy has an inferior mage program but good enough for me,” I finished revealing my plans going forward. Callem nodded.

“Very good Storme. We can leave tomorrow for Aegis or directly after the tournament,” Callem asked my preference.

“Tomorrow. It is better to wait a day, plus I want to celebrate Gareth’s victory with him.” We both grinned.

“Well let’s go and watch young Gareth take the capital by Storme,” Callem assented.

“Hopefully his head doesn’t get too large,” I mumbled. Callem slapped me hard on the back. That is what friends are for.