**CHAPTER 43**

**The first evening on the farm we were all tense. Every once in a while a roil of thunder reached your ears if you were outside. Powerful magics were being unleashed a few miles away. It seemed they were coming from the city but it could have been in the skies above.**

**The twins made dinner while our mother’s comforted, Freya and Gwen. Gareth, Aelyn, and I were on the lookout and moving items to the farmhouse. The food wasn’t bad. It was simple rice with diced beef and some vegetables cooked in butter. I complimented the twins on their efforts and they jokingly said it was their payment for losing their bet to me. Gareth’s ears were sharp and he was eavesdropping on our conversation.**

**I said, “I don’t know ladies. A simple dinner like this? If I had lost I am sure you would have required something spectacular of me and there would have been dessert.” They giggled and Gareth was eyeing me for an explanation that I was not going to give.**

**Mera said in good humor, “Fine Storme! You will get our specialty meal and a dessert after the meal.” I wasn’t sure if the dessert was innuendo but either I was happy Gareth was in the dark. Sometimes it was fun to tease your friends. Aelyn was outside on watch so she didn’t hear the exchange.**

**Aelyn had sharper eyesight than Gareth and I due to her half-elven heritage. Therefore she volunteered to take double shifts watching for danger. We all huddled in the cellar with Aelyn at the door on watch, waiting.**

**With morning the sounds of combat lessened and I went to relieve Aelyn. She said, “I saw a number of skyships during the night. I am not familiar with the silhouettes but there appears to be intense combat around the island.”**

**“Thank you Aelyn for watching through the night. Let me show you the two standard silhouettes for the Skyholme navy.” I made a small hand-sized model of a Harbinger out of copper and handed it to her. I then made a model of the Wasp-class ship and handed her that bronze model.**

**“These are good. You could sell them…but I guess you don’t need the money.” Aelyn said as she rotated the figures in her hands. A distant explosion in the direction of the city let us know the conflict had not yet concluded.**

**“The Wasp is the scout of the navy. Not many were built according to Sebastian but you may see some. The Harbinger is the most populous ship in our navy.” I was switching my sight from the different approaches to the farmhouse as Aelyn lingered. When she didn’t leave I asked, “Is there something else? You should really get some sleep.” Aelyn hesitated before heading below. Gareth’s mother and the twins brought up food to cook and I resumed my watch.**

**Mera brought me a bacon and cheese sandwich and sat next to me, “So this is where you and Gareth have been training. We heard rumors when we visited Hen’s Hollow,” she smiled and handed me a cup of red juice. “So are you going to the Annuals with Gareth?” she asked.**

**The Annuals I thought. That was the big combat tournament held in Skyholme every year. There were three categories, pre-academy, academy, and post-academy. I somehow doubted they would happen with a war going on. “I don’t think so. Fighting is Gareth’s thing. I am not sure they will be held with the Sadians stopping in for a visit either,” I added.**

**“Oh, Storme! That is funny! I don’t think the Sadians will stay here long though. We read our histories and the fighting usually lasts just a few days before they retreat.” She spoke optimistically. “What about Aelyn? She is really pretty and you don’t treat her like an indentured. Are you two a couple?”**

**Mera was studying me waiting for an answer. “No, she is just a friend. I will help her remove the mark and most likely she will move on.” A big white smile lined her face at my statement. Did this girl have designs on me? She was pretty enough in a tomboy sort of way. And her best asset was her constant smile and optimism. I added, “I am working on developing my magic so I have not given much thought to dating and the like. Once I have advanced far enough I would reconsider.” Hopefully, that would let her down easily.**

**“Mother says most people who get married meet in the first-year academy,” she replied still smiling. Well, that was going to be a very small pool, 12 to 14 of us living in the old barracks. Fera came over and handed me another sandwich. I nibbled on it not really hungry.**

**Fera gave an update on Monty. He was up and about down below and drooling at all the hanging meat. His attempts to get some were keeping Freya and Gwen occupied. I told her she could let them know to give him some. He had gotten a lot of healing and was probably extremely hungry. Fera and Mera looked at each other and asked, “Can someone go and check on our grandparents at our farm?” We are worried about them.**

**“I don’t think it is a good idea. We encountered mercenaries by the swimming hole attacking Freya and Gwen so I think there may be more small groups out there,” I said trying to get them to dismiss their request. Gareth approached our little group with a plate containing two and a half sandwiches, soon to be just two as he was finishing the half now.**

**“So Gareth I heard you were going to the Annuals this year! Going to compete in the post-academy group?” I said jokingly. He looked at the twins and tried to speak with a mouthful of food that he forced down.**

**“Uh yeah, I was going to try my hand at the pre-academy group. The bracket is only 32 and I have to win a few bouts locally to get a slot. I was going to ask you to join me in trying to get a bid,” Gareth said slightly perturbed at getting outed by the twins before talking to me. He was doing his best to impress the young women and maybe he was succeeding.**

**I gave him a sidelong glance that said not on your life! But he persisted, “Callem thinks you can make it. Solaris has two slots in the tourney based on our population for the pre-academy group. That just means we need to be better than the kids in the city and surrounding towns.” He tried to get me to commit. He added, “You may run into the kids from the gang that attacked you in the qualifications!” Damn you Gareth! That would be the one thing that might get me to join.**

**“I will think about it,” I said conceding. The twins seemed excited at the prospect of convincing their dad to take them to the city to see both of us fight in the qualifiers. Something in my vision flicked and I looked up and located a skyship. It must be at least a mile up. I guessed it could be a Harbinger but was only 80% certain. A smaller and faster ship approached from the distance and we all watched as lines of magic spells bombarded the ships. You could see debris being blown off. Then a third ship appeared out of nowhere. It must have had invisibility or camouflage and it also laid into the Harbinger with fire and lightning.**

**It was fascinating to watch the dance above us. The smaller ships circled and worked like sharks circling a whale. The battle passed right over our heads and some debris fell in the woods a few hundred feet away. One piece was clearly a body. It wasn’t far away, maybe 200 feet, and the sound was a dull thud. Whoever that was they were definitely dead.**

**“I think that was a Wolfsguard,” Aelyn said. I turned shocked to see her. She should be getting some sleep. “At least that is what it looked like to me. I will go check it out if you want me to.” It wasn’t far away, just beyond our obstacle courses. It should be safe to check it out as I was sure the victim was dead. Then again in a world of magic, you never know for sure.**

**“Gareth go with her and just check it out and come right back,” I said. I wondered how I had been out in charge of making the decisions. Aelyn and Gareth with weapons in hand moved to woods and the downed Wolfsguard.**

**They came back a few minutes later and Gareth spoke to me and the twins, “Definitely dead. And not a Wolfsguard. Aelyn thinks it was a wolfkin. Don’t know what business they have being up in skyships though.” Gareth looked a little sick so I guessed it was a gruesome mess. I thought about looting the body but we didn’t need to.**

**“A ship is going down,” Mera said and we all looked as one of the smaller ships was breaking up but not over the island. Whoever was on the ship had a long descent to the lowlands with no breaks. The other smaller ship fled and the larger Harbinger gave pursuit but it was obvious it was not going to catch it.**

**Our group watched the sky and approaches together. Gareth got his wish as he and the twins were sitting close together and he could brag about himself nonstop. Aelyn had returned to get some rest so I was tortured with Gareth’s tales of his own prowess. I began spamming my *cleanliness* spell until Mera asked what was the strange spell. Then I told them about my cleaning spell and I had them hooked as I demonstrated it. Soon I was using my healing spell to remove their scars. Gareth didn’t look too happy at being upstaged. I could hear him already tonight whispering something like, ‘Come on Stormy there are two of them. Do you really need both!’**

**That reminded me of my *alarm* spell. If I could learn it then I could set alarms around the farmhouse and we wouldn’t need to be out here watching so intently. “Hey, Gareth I am going to study my spell inside. You and the twins can remain on watch.”**

**Gareth looked thrilled even though Mera decided to help prepare lunch so he would only be spending time with Fera. I made myself comfortable on the couch and summoned my *alarm* spellbook. I ignored the activity around me and focused. The spell wasn’t overly complex. It was basically like writing a simple ‘if-then’ statement with the runes when you cast the spell. When lunch was ready I ate it blindly.**

**Evening rolled around and Aelyn returned to take watch. I was surprised when Mera said she would go on watch with Aelyn. Monty came upstairs with Freta and Gwen with our mother following. Freya ran to me and hugged me. She cried into me saying she thought I had been killed at the river when the ogre connected with his sword.**

**I just held my sister and told her it would take at least six ogres to take her brother down.**

**It was two more days before Callem returned to the farmhouse. We hadn’t seen many skyships over the two days and thought the attack had been repelled but I still kept everyone at the farm. Gareth had made progress on both Mera and Fera. They talked quite a bit during meals. Freya and Gwen were recovering from their PTSD. Monty was back to his old self as well.**

**I rushed to Callem as he approached the farmhouse. “Callem is everything alright? Is it over?”**

**“Inside Storme. I will fill everyone in inside.” He walked inside his home and looked around the room taking everyone in and nodded as if confirming something. There was an electricity to the air now that Callem was here. He had this presence to him. It made you feel safe.**

**A lot of idle chatter was deflected by Callem as we all settled in the living room to hear the news. Callem started, “Gareth your father is safe as are Caleb and Pascal. Pascal was injured but is doing fine.” He looked a the twins, “I am sorry but your farm was attacked and your grandparents didn’t make it. The rest of your family is well though. The girls were in shock and Fera was next to me so I put my arm around her and pulled the shocked girl into a hug. It wasn’t long before she was crying and Mera joined the therapeutic expulsion of emotion through tears.**

**Everyone in the house consoled the twins and eventually, our mothers shepherded them to Callem’s guest bedroom to sleep it off. With the twins resting from the pain of loss, Callem resumed his news. “It was an extensive attack. I talked with Sebastian and they attacked three of the islands. It was the Sadians, beastkin, and a slew of mercenaries. The past is coming back to haunt the Triumverate.” Callem paused and looked at the two young girls in his midst. He seemed to change his approach to what he planned to say.**

**“For many centuries the Skyholme people raided the lesser beastkin tribes in the lowlands. Against our powerful ships, they could do little to resist. We took what we wanted from them including their young woman. These women were used to create the Wolfsguard. It appears the tribes have now united under a single leader now and formed a pact with the Sadians. The Sadians built the tribes their own skyships in return for helping attack Skyholme which I assume they were more than happy to do.” Callem paused and went and got a drink from the counter.**

**“Sebastian told me in confidence,” he looked at all of us one at a time, “that we lost half our skyships in the assault.” We all took a deep breath. That was a lot of ships and crew. “It is bad but we took at least two of their ships for everyone we lost. Both sides had massive losses. Cilia and Leda are being called to return to the naval academy. The Triumvirate has issued a conscription order. Somehow my own age fell out of the range!” He chuckled darkly.**

**“The city of Solarus was only attacked with mercenaries, just to distract the navy from the real heavy assaults. It worked. Many people in the cities were killed. The only good news is Sebastian doesn’t think the Sadians are in any position to push their advantage. It should be years before they have enough ships to stage another assault.” Callem looked at me and Storm.**

**“There will be a declaration shortly. They are asking for those willing to enter the first-year academy early and then join either the city guard or navy to bolster the defense forces.” I was almost 13 and would have entered the academy next year. I knew Gareth was going to volunteer. He was already bouncing in his seat from excitement. If I joined him then I would be going to the first-year academy with my brother and his friends.**

**Callem looked at our mothers, “I had been planning to take over the first-year academy next year when these two entered but I think it won't be hard to push my plans a year early. Especially since instructors will be sorely needed. If you allow it I will do everything I can to prepare your sons.”**

**Gareth looked at his mother like a puppy. We technically needed to reach our age of maturity in order to enter the academy if we went earlier then our parents would need to approve. Unless the Trivumerate passed a law to change that which wouldn’t surprise me.**

**My own mother was focused on me and caught my gaze. She spoke, “Storme will enter under your care Master Callem. My husband has a lot of faith in you and you have already transformed him into an exceptional person of character in the short time he has been out here.” This was all Gareth’s mother needed to acquiesce as well. So it looked like we were going to the academy which started in just a few weeks.**

**The conversation devolved after that as Freya spent an hour trying to convince our mother that she should also go to the academy with her two older brothers to keep an eye on them. Of course, she wasn’t buying any of it and it got a lot of good humor going around in these not-so-bright times.**

**My mind however was focused on another plan. Sometime in the next few years, before the Sadians returned, I needed my own skyship and I needed to get my family to the lowlands. I could forecast this war easily enough. If it was a war of attrition the dysfunctional ruling Triumverate of Skyholme would lose.**

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