Chapter 89

I tried to focus during classes all day my thoughts kept turning to Bleiz.  Was I freeing him from a life of servitude, or was I using him?  I wasn’t sure if I was just trying to justify accepting the bond.  I did have plans for Bleiz.  Based on his skill set and invisibility necklace, I wanted to leave him to watch over my family when I wasn’t around.  A guard dog.  But he was sapient, so I was just as terrible as the ruling families of Skyholme.  My moral compass was on the fritz.

Right after the post-dinner lecture, I left the barracks alone and walked out into the woods.   I was listening sounds of Bleiz, and he surprised me by appearing right in front of me.  “I really like this toy you loaned me,” he fingered the necklace.

“No, it is a gift, but make sure it stays hidden under your clothes,” I said.  He was wearing plain wool clothes with the Torrent colors of white and gray.   “We are going to visit a reader, Bleiz.  I need to assess your skills, and then we can figure out a series of spells you can imprint.”  We were going to approach Ennet’s house from the woods and knock on the back door.

As we walked, I asked, “So tell me about your training, Bleiz.”

He fell in step beside me, “I finished first, second, or third in my Wolfpack in every evaluation.  Only Miriam could beat me in combat.” I sensed something in the way he said, Miriam.  “I know how to imprint spells but have never been given a spellbook.  I was told I would be selected to be the personnel guard of Otieno Bricio, serving as his spell-sword and instrument.”

“Who told you that?” I asked.

“Otieno himself.  He visited a year ago to watch us train under the Blackguard captains.  Miriam and I were told we would join him,” Bleiz spoke freely.  I sensed that perhaps he had been friends with Miriam.  I didn’t pursue my thought, though.

“Let’s make sure you are seen as little as possible.  Can the bond be broken?  Can you be freed of your forced devotion to me?” I asked seriously.

Bleiz stopped walking and said, “Storme, there are questions you can not ask.  That is one of them.  If another Wolfguard not bonded to you heard you ask that they would report to you to the Inquisitor’s office.”  I nodded at his hard stare, and we continued.

I knocked on the door, and Callem answered it shortly.  The square old man looked at Bleiz, “This is him?”

I introduced him, “This is Bleiz.  A Wolfguard companion of mine.”  Callem moved assigned and let us in.

Wynna and Ennet were in the living room talking with Aelyn.  They all watched as we approached, “Everyone, this is Bleiz.  I was hoping to get a reading for him.  And also a new aether core reading for myself.”

Wynna rose, “Of course, Storme.  Do you wish to go first?”

“No, get Bleiz completed first, and I will wait.  He has an awakened core, so if you could also read his aether matrix and core sizes,” I said. I patiently waited while sitting across from Aelyn.  Callem went with them, probably not completely trusting Bleiz.  I didn’t have time to talk much with Aelyn before Bleiz returned with his sheet of paper.  He handed it to me, which Wynna soured at.  I could tell she didn’t like the idea of the enslaved Wolfguard.

I took the sheet and scanned it.

***Abilities***

*Sense Vibration, Tier 1*

*Peripheral Awareness, Tier 1*

***Traits***

*Scent Recognition, Tier 3*

*Longevity, Tier 1*

*Keen Sight, Tier 1*

*Filter Sound, Tier 2*

*Enhanced Reflexes, Tier 1*

***Skill Affinities***

*Stealth, Tier 2*

*Tracking, Tier 2*

*Aether Magic, Tier 1*

*Aether Core Awakening 6*

*Current Aether Core 32*

*Maximum Aether Core 78*

*Aether Core Matrix Current 11*

*Aether Core Matrix Max 19*

He only had two abilities at tier 1.  These were his innate magical powers, and both focused on awareness.  His traits were his genetics and indicated his superior sense of smell, excellent eyesight, quick reflexes, animal hearing, and longer than normal life span.  His skill affinities had tier 2 for stealth and tracking.  That had been noted on the sheet Pomare had handed me when I selected Bleiz.  His affinity for aether magic was a surprise, and I mumbled it aloud.

Wynna said harshly, “It is common for anyone conceived in a dungeon to have aether affinity, Storme.”  I could tell Wynna had also decided to educate me at this moment, “Wolfguard are conceived when wolfkin, stolen from their families in the lowlands, are brought into Skyholme dungeons and forced to have sex with men.”  She gave me a hard stare like it was my fault.

Bleiz didn’t help my case as he added, “There are about forty pups in a cycle.   By the time we are fourteen, only twenty-three of us are left in the training pack.”  I didn’t have to ask what happened to the rest.  I suddenly felt a lot of sympathy for Bylura.

Wynna asked with some bite, “Are you ready for your reading, Storme?”  I went with her and Wynna to the back room, and she laid into me, “Storme, I can not believe you did this to the boy out there.”

“Boy?  Please, Wynna, he is stronger, faster, and more deadly than most men.  Also, he was being trained as Otieno Bricio’s personal assassin.  If I didn’t bond him, he would be taking orders from that member of the Triumvirate.  And you know how I treated Aelyn with respect.  I will do the same with Bleiz, and if there is a way to free him of the bond, I will.”  I pleaded my case.

“Free him?  It is more than just magic, Storme.  They are raised and educated to be loyal servants.  Once they imprint on someone, ending it is like tearing their heart out.  You have never seen a Wolfguard who lost their master.  I have!  They are listless and usually allowed to take their own life.  You tied his fate to you!”  Ennet watched as her mother continued to shriek at me, nodding at her comments.  When Wynna was done yelling, they calmed down and did my reading.

I took the paper, shoved it in my pocket, and retreated to the living room.  Bleiz was talking to Aelyn, who had a lot of questions.  I sat down as Wynna and Ennet joined us.  “Thank you for the readings.  I wanted to ask another favor.  I wanted Bleiz to stay at Callem’s farm during the day and watch my family in the evening and night.  I have given him an invisibility necklace to help him, but I was hoping you could provide him armor, clothes, food, and whatever else he needs.”

Callem answered as Wynna was still agitated, “There is plenty of food out there in the main house cellar.  I will bring him out there tomorrow.  I am sure Wynna and Ennet would love to spend your coin on the Bleiz,” he said smirking.  This had Wynna stand and start measuring a reluctant Bleiz. I placed four platinum coins on the counter.

I felt Wynna had calmed enough to ask about the dungeon essences, “Wynna, can you confirm what these are?” I produced the two vials of swirling colors and placed them on the table. Wynna’s eyes bulged as she picked one up.

“Amazing,” Wynna said, turning it in her hand and looking at the script. “I never thought I would see a true dungeon essence. This one, Strome, is a teleport ability, a strong one. It requires a living object to anchor to, and you exchange places with them.” She turned it for a few moments, mesmerized by the colors.

She picked up the second vial, and her eyes bulged again, “This one increases your aether tolerance and creates a small gravity well in your aether core to increase the rate your aether recovers.” She put it down, “Any mage worth his salt would kill you for that essence, Storme.”

It was good that Wynna had been able to confirm both essences. I placed them both back into my dimensional space and thanked Wynna. Wynna was a scholar and had studied the aetheric script that dungeons used.

Wynna advised me, “Dungeon essences are precious, Storme. You can use one without worry. Two safely, but once you get to a third essence, it needs to harmonize with the ones you already consumed. Keep the vials and consult a master scholar before consuming a third.”

“By synergy, do you mean the same type of effects?” I asked.

Wynna waivered, “I couldn’t tell you. You need to consult a master. Anything I tell you might be inaccurate.” I nodded and decided I would only use one of the essences until I knew more.

Bleiz asked, “What about weapons?  I am unarmed, Storme.”

“Write down what you want, and I will get whatever you want.  I will also give you this to learn as your first spell.”  I handed him the *cleanliness* spellbook from my dimensional storage.  He read the title and looked confused so I explained, “It is an aetheric spell, so it should be easier for you to imprint as your first spell.  It has a lot of usefulness.  There are a number of evolutions in there for hunters.  Eliminating scent, cleansing bowels and bladders, eliminating your tracks.  I think you will find it extremely useful.”

Aelyn asked jokingly, “I wonder if Monty will submit dominance to him.  He still growls at Bylura when he sees her in town.”

Bleiz asked, “Who is Monty?”

“My sister’s guardian Shepard.  He has excellent senses, so challenge you not to be found out by him when you guard her in the shadows,”  I said.

“Just a dog? He will never know I am there. Is that going to be my first task?  Watch and protect your sister?”  Bleiz questioned.

“Yes, and my parents, but primarily my sister.  They will all move to my residence in Aegis City soon.  After they move, we can reevaluate.  I will give you a tour of the town now while you are invisible,” I said, rising. Bleiz disappeared and left with me.

I pulled the paper out of my pocket and reviewed it quickly.

 *Aether Core Awakening 1,143*

*Current Aether Core 3,992*

*Maximum Aether Core 25,378*

*Aether Core Matrix Current 32*

*Aether Core Matrix Max 109*

My aether core had increased about 50% since the last time I checked. Even my potential maximum had increased by about 10%. I assumed that had to do with my new aether cycling.

“Bleiz, is you can get your aether core up to 50, I will teach you a cycling technique for your aether core,” I said while walking and pointing out landmarks and buildings in town. I might have looked a little crazy talking to myself, but there were only a few people walking in town.

I pointed out people and gave names that I remembered. My house was important, and we walked the perimeter and then moved on to Freya’s favorite hangout spots. We stopped when we reached the bend in the river where the locals swam. I took the list of Bleiz’s weapons.

Wire Garrote x 8

Karambit (curved knife) x 2

Throwing knife x 12

Hunter’s Knife x 1

Skinning Knife x 1

Short Sword x 2

I started asking him questions to get specific sizes, weights, and dimensions. I had Bleiz appear and make some quick iron replicas for every weapon he wanted. Bleiz’s shock was apparent on his face, but he didn’t let it show in his voice as he directed me. I told Bleiz he could return to Ennet’s house, and I was going back to the barracks. He took a long look at me before activating his necklace.

When I got back to my room, I fell onto my bed. Gareth wasn’t here, and I remembered it was 5th day, and I was supposed to be with him at Twin Rocks tonight. I just didn’t have the energy. I quickly did my evening exercises, aether core, focus, and making platinum coins. I then set my alarms, arcane locks, and privacy shield.

The first thing I made was the garrotes for Bleiz. I used a finely braided mithril. One coin was enough to make all eight garrotes with steel rings at the ends. I then proceeded to make his short swords while lying in bed. My alarms told me Gareth was back, and I watched him crash onto his bed. I broke my privacy screen and healed him. A few bruises and two broken bones. Elijah and Elora had gone all out, “Do they need healing as well?” I asked.

“No,” Gareth muttered, face down in his pillow. “They had healing potions—not that they needed them.” I nodded and grinned and was happy I had missed the weapons session.

“Sorry, I missed the fun, Gareth. I will introduce you to Bleiz next week. He is going to keep an eye on Freya,” I said, sitting on my bed and getting ready to reset my privacy shield.

Gareth rolled to his side, “Are you going to let me spar with him, Storme?”

“Sure thing Gareth. I am working on his weapons now. Maybe we can take Freya to the *Shiny Platinum* next 7th day, and you two can go use the third-floor training room,” I offered.

I set my privacy screen and completed all of Bleiz’s weapons. I would only enchant the short swords for durability and sharpness when I got more supplies from Instructor Aldon.

The last day of classes for the week had my crew excited to go to the *Shiny Platinum*. I left the weapons I created for Callem to hand off to Bleiz. I had enchanted the short swords during the artificing class. All the weapons were of the highest quality that I could produce with my metal shaping skill.

Gareth convinced everyone to skip dinner and headed to Solaris City to take a skyship to Aegis City. As we boarded the transport, I noticed a few people watching us. Gareth confirmed he had seen them too. I was glad Bleiz was staying behind to watch my family.

On the trip to the city, Aelyn was extremely animated with the twins. I could tell she was happier. When she got to the *Shiny Platinum*, she was going to see Gimble immediately and make sure she was registered. I planned to get dinner and get some rest before the dive tomorrow. That didn’t happen. As soon as we entered the *Shiny Platinum,* Remy dragged me away to Rippon’s room.

Rippon’s room was covered in large schematics, materials lists, notes, and references. Remy excitedly said, “We are ready to start! With Rippon’s help, we have identified some improvements for the skyship to make it lighter and stronger. The materials will cost more, but they are easier to obtain since they are too expensive to use in Navy ships.”

Seeing where this conversation was going, I asked, “How much coin do you need?”

Rippon pulled a materials list off the wall and handed it me. The lumber and laminates were 29,500 gold at current prices. I asked, “Isla Bricio is our foreman for the project. Give her the list and see if she can get better prices.” The two left in a hurry to knock on Isla’s door. I was surprised to see the old man run like a little kid.

I pulled out ten large platinum coins from my storge. That was 10,000 gold. I scanned my space again, and I only had about 2,500 gold in platinum, gold, and silver left. Currently, if I used all my aether, I could make a single large platinum coin. I was gaining more aether, and my conversion was getting more efficient. I could make just over a single mithril coin with all my aether.

I didn’t have any more time to ponder as Rippon and Remy were dragging Isla in tow. “I put all the coin that could be spared on the table. Come see me again in six weeks.” I left them to deal with Isla as I tried to escape to my room. I climed the stairs from the second floor to the third floor and groaned.

Loriel, Bylura, and Gammon were standing outside my apartment door. They had clearly been waiting for me. I smiled, opened the door to my apartment, and invited them in. Loriel sat on the sofa while Bylura sat next to her, and Gammon remained by the door. Loriel asked, “I thought you would have your Wolfguard with you?”

“He is occupied,” I replied, not willing to give away what Bleiz was up to.

Loriel smiled, “Did you hear about the uproar your selection caused in the Citadel?” I nodded, and Loriel chuckled merrily. “You seem to be the largest thorn in the Bricio’s side in a hundred years. What you have not heard is the Bricios have lost their dungeon. The Miaden family called in loans, and Halifax Bricio, that is Baladon’s and Abaddon’s father, couldn’t pay. Well, at first, he got a massive loan from Otieno Bricio to cover debts. But it turned into a chain reaction, and more nobles called in too many loans for Halifax to cover. The only asset he had that could cover the debts was the private dungeon.”

Loriel was grinning madly now in pure joy. I asked, “And I am assuming this is a good thing?”

“Oh, Storme! That dungeon was the source of most of the Bricio’s wealth. Without it they are in freefall. All their other businesses can not generate enough revenue to sustain their interests as the luxury economy has been stagnating since the Sadian attack. The dungeon provided the Bricios liquid funds. Otieno was heard cursing Halifax Bricio in the Citadel after he transferreed the deed to Tamber Miaden! Pomare has taken to publicly display the mithril shirt as a symbol of the weakness of the Bricios, rubbing it in their face. Otieno has been selling dozens of indentured contracts at a discount to try and make up the difference, but most likely, the Bricios are going to lose over half of their assets when all is said and done,” she giggled joyously.

Then her face got serious, “You need to keep your Wolfguard close, Storme. The Bricios may be distracted now, but once things settle, they will be lashing out against everyone who caused this, they may even try force to recapture what they have lost. Pomare has claimed credit for the brilliant trap of having Baladon wear the mithril shirt in the honor duel with you. Abaddon has been given the command of one of the new Harbinger skyships and has assembled a loyal crew around himself. My sources say he will use them to avenge his family. If he uses his Skyholme Navy battleship to that end, all hell will break loose.”

“How many Wolfguard does Abaddon have?” I asked.

“Three,” Loriel answered immediately. “Two are always with him, and the third protects his estate. “Baladon’s only Wolfguard was killed in an accident with three others and has not been replaced. Halifax lost his three Wolfguard in the same accident.” Loriel couldn’t help but smile.

I now understood that Otieno had killed the four Wolfguard to not only try to nab Bleiz but also punish Baladon for losing the duel and Halifax for losing the dungeon. I needed to get my family to Aegis City sooner than later. I would have Mia double the guards at the *Shiny Platinum*. The chain reaction from such a simple act of defending a pretty girl. What was that saying from my past world…I searched my memory and finally got it, ‘the face that launched a thousand ships.’

My distracted thoughts were interrupted, and Loriel got my attention, “There may be a civil war between the Torrent and Bricios. It is not certain, but I have been asked others in the succession which side I would take.”

“How long before something sparks?” I asked extremely concerned.

“Months until the Bricios are in a position to move. If it does occur, the power struggle will likely happen on the capital island. So when you see a stream of private ships arriving all at once, fleeing the capital, that will be your signal,” Loriel added. Something about her face told me she was happy all this was occurring. It was indirectly by her hand. She tricked Gareth into escorting her, which caused me to go, and then this coming shit storm.