Chapter 57 (Arc 2 Chapter 11)

As we stood across from the opposing academy, two men wearing the crests of the mage academy entered. They dictated the rules, which were very similar to the qualifiers.  The largest difference was that killing someone intentionally would result in a ten-year sentence as an indentured.  Guess I wasn’t going to kill Leon today.  Although the mage had said intentionally killing….

We had an hour to warm up as the stands filled.  It was mostly family members, and there was no cost to watch the exhibition match.  I saw a few faces I recognized from our little town.  The disturbing trio was Loriel flanked by Bylura and Isla.  Her large Wolfguard bodyguard was standing behind her and a large radius of seats was empty around them.  I just hoped Loriel didn’t cheer loudly for me.  I was already regretting letting the young woman into my social sphere.  I didn’t see any Bricio’s in the stands.  At least none that I recognized.  My mother arrived with Freya, and I waved to them.  Father was on a skyship guard route.

I stretched with the twins, Mia and Gareth, in a corner.  Gareth spoke first, “So what is the plan, Stormy?  Should we give them a false sense of hope before crushing them?”  He followed this with his best evil laugh that sounded ridiculous.

Fera, who was fighting 11th, asked, “Storme, do you really think we can win?  You and Gareth can win, but us?  I mean most of those,” she indicated the other academy students on the far, “have had trainers since they were able to walk.”

She should have asked Gareth for a confidence boost but had asked me.  Why was everyone deferring to me?  “Yes.  Your staff skills are remarkable, Ferra.  Just hold your strength ability in reserve.  If you need to use it do it on a parry and then use the opening to get a cranial strike.” This was the tactic that she had worked on with Gareth.  Her *strength of the ox* ability allowed her to temporarily double her strength.  It was a relatively weak tier 1 ability.  A better tier 1 strength ability was *lion’s might*.  This gave a passive 30% increase to strength.

Mia asked, “So how are you ranked third in our academy Storme?”

I laughed, “A favor from Callem.  He used my duel with Pascal when I used Gareth’s broadsword to rank Pascal ahead of me.  Being 3rd allows me to match against Leon.  He was the one who stabbed me in the alley.”  The twins looked at me sharply with narrowed eyes.  They had heard of the incident but didn’t know the attacker was known.

Mia looked over at Leon, “He really tried to kill you?  I guess it makes sense he got away with it.  Half his extended family are guards in Solaris.” Mia being from the city was familiar with a fair number of other kids around her age.

“Callem has been working to see his family feels some pain for what he did.  A bunch of his cousins were called to serve in the lowlands. One of the dungeon towns I think.  His father was also assigned to a small town on Deepwell Island.”  I said.

Mera interjected, “Deepwell?  The water island with the massive lake.  But there are only a few fishing villages and one water-themed dungeon.”

“Exactly!”  I said.  “Callem still has some friends.  Wynna told me he tried to bring charges against Leon and his older brother, who was a guard from the attack. Unfortunately, the matter was buried with no witnesses and the truth seekers unwilling to pursue his inquest.”

Gareth asked his question again, “So should I draw it out, Storme or just drop him?”

“Your call Gareth,” I said and he rolled his eyes at me.

The pairings started with top pair and worked down to thirty-three.  There was a point system which we were informed of.  The higher the ranking the more points you got for a win.  What was on the line?  Apparently, 89 gold in funding for the winning academy.  Not a lot but it would cover food costs for a thrifty academy for the year.

The first match started. Gareth danced and played with his opponent for a good twenty minutes before disarming him by breaking his wrist.  The boy had a healing ability but it was too slow and Gareth’s sword at his neck caused the mages to intervene and end the match.  Pascal’s match was entertaining as it was a match of equals.  Pascal had his teeth shattered when his opponent smashed his hilt into his face.  Pascal fought on, ignoring the injury.  Pascal won when he cut deep into his opponent’s calf muscle, effectively ending his ability to dodge.

Pascal’s face was a mess with missing teeth and blood all over himself as he smiled at us.  I congratulated him as he headed to the healers to get new teeth grown.  My match was next, and Leon and his fellows no longer looked cocky.  I entered the ring with staff twirling.  Leon was now wielding a spiked mace.  The wrist strap on the weapon made me slightly weary.  It was too worn and thick to be for just making sure he didn’t drop his weapon.    
  
I decided to needle him, “Have you had trouble yanking yourself since I almost took off your arm?”  I had been wielding a saber in that match and now had a staff.

Leon’s face hardened, “I am going to smash your balls up and into your mouth to shut you up.”

I just grinned, looking forward to this.  When the fight started his trick became evident.  The strap-on mace was magical and allowed him to change the mace’s direction instantly.  I got caught in the rapid back-swing and intervened with my staff but my fingers on my right hand were crushed.  Leon smirked but when I didn’t cry out in pain or retreat he looked baffled.

It was much harder to manipulate the staff but I had trained physically and mentally to work through the pain.  My mend flesh worked on my hand.  Definitely some broken fingers….and my pinky was missing.  Oh, it was stuck to his spiked mace.  That was an awesome enchantment on the mace.  Changing directions like that instantly….some type of inertia change.  I would have to ask Aldon about it.

My mind returned to Leon who had also recovered from me not falling down and whimpering.  Now that I was aware he could change directions with his swing instantly I knew I could take him.  Some blood trickled from his nose.  I was confused as I had not hit him in the face yet.  Then I figured it out.  It was backlash from his enchantment,  the recoil cost of changing the maces direction.  I knew this from studying skyship enchantments.  Skyships had a magical inertia sink. Sharp changes in direction went there, protecting the crew. The runic device was large and could not be carried easily.

So Leon paid the price for his successful strike.  I grinned madly knowing he couldn’t use his trick again without sustaining serious injury.  I spun into my attack and laid into him.  The flurry of blows broke his jaw, kneecap, sternum and clavicle in seconds.  I broke his jaw so he could not voice his surrender.  My next series was going to target his wrist and ribs but he dropped his mace and ran away.  Well, stumbled and fell and crawled away. Well, how was this fair?  I bent down to the mace and retrieved my pinky from a spike as I was declared the winner.  I went over to the healing mages and got my finger reattached and the bones healed.

While I was being healed I watched the 4th bout, Mia. She easily handle a large boy.  I walked over to Gareth and he complimented me on my stoicism.  He said he would have been tricked by the changing direction mace too.  I just grunted.  I wasn’t done with Leon yet.  My anger seemed to boil to the surface whenever I saw him.

The matches proceeded and the twins both won.  In fact, we only had two losses to the other academy. Our 16th and 21st members lost.  Both through some tricky on the part of their opponents.    When my second match came around I was paired with a tiny girl who had the deer in the headlights look.  She was 5’3” with dark hair and light brown eyes. She had a shield and short sword.

She remembered what I had done to Leon. Rather than defeat her, I slowly engaged her and gave her a 20 minute lesson on defense and attack.  At first, she was confused but eventually understood I was not going to beat her senseless.  After 20 minutes, I told the official that I conceded the match to her. This got her staring at me with perplexity had curisouity mixed in. She only weighed about 120 pounds and I outclassed her in every physical catagory. We had already won the matchup and secured the reward so there was no reason to draw this out. Her body also showed signs of bruising and injury.

Back with Gareth, he whispered, “That was awesome.  She is cute and she is sure to reward you for that!”  I looked at my friend’s eager and happy face and shook my head in amazement at his one-track mind.

“Gareth, I just humiliated Leon more by letting her win.  Besides she had bruises on her ribs and arms.   My guess is she gets beat up daily in training.  I just don’t understand how someone so small is in the Solaris elite first-year academy.”

Mia was close by and answered my question, “She is the illegitimate daughter of Hiram, the cloth merchant.  We played together when I was younger. Mikaela is her name if you are interested.  Hiram’s main business is in Aegis city and he employs Mikaela in his estate in Solaris, away from his family.”

I was about to offer to take my group of friends to a restaurant when Bylura appeared from the stands. “Storme, Loriel wishes to dine with you to discuss your joint business ventures.” My tempura started to flare but I got it contained and restrained before showing any anger. There was no joint business venture. I was paying for everything to renovate and furnish the warehouse conversion.

“Sorry, everyone. It looks like I need to clear something up.” I palmed Gareth a gold coin before realizing that he had his own winnings for winning the pre-academy tournament. He took it anyway and gathered the three girls to go and look for a restaurant. I told Callem where I was going, and he just looked hard at Bylura, who flinched slightly from his gaze but he nodded.

 I followed Bylura to the main road and further until we came to the upper side of Solaris. The noble district here was not as vast or impressive as Aegis of the capital. I did absorb my surroundings as I had never been to this part of the city before. Bylura stopped and led me into what I assumed was an ale house.

It smelled slightly perfumed and had large booths that could seat eight people. We went upstairs and into a small room with a large window. Loriel and Isla were seated at a table with her drawings spread out. I sat at the table and a waitress brought out multiple pitchers of various drink and a cup for me. I selected a weak-smelling wine.

Loriel appraised me before speaking, “Isla has shown me her renderings of your building.”

I stopped her there, “That is a breach of my trust. I pay Isla, not you. If she is going to run off at your beck and call I think I will be replacing her.” Isla looked horrified and quickly looked to her friend Loriel.

Loriel hand trembled just slightly when she reached for her drink….was that in anger or regret of overstepping? She sipped and ordered her thoughts, “I apologize for overstepping. Isla was just showing me my apartment. Since I had to furnish it myself I wanted to see the dimensions.” She sipped again then spoke, “Congratulations on your victory today,” she eyed my pinky finger, “You are quite the warrior.” I remained quiet and her eye twitched in what I assumed was annoyance. “I wanted to make a business proposal to you.”

Her tact had switched to caution, like she had misread me. I spoke without pause, “I am not interested.”

Her temper flared and she said. “You will at least have the courtesy of hearing it before declining it,” she growled, losing her lofty demeanor. Bylura and Isla winced.

I put on a grin and laid back in my chair and rolled my hand in the air to indicate to proceed. Probably not the best tact for one of the more powerful people in Skyholme but I wanted to appear in control and if I could dissuade her trying to meddle with me all the better.

“So I have renters lined up for your apartments, 40 gold per month. That is much higher than you could find on your own. In return, I want a 25% stake in your building.

I did the math, 15 rooms currently unassigned equaled 600 gold a month. I had talked with Wynna and she thought if I rented the apartments three of four gold a month reasonable. Of coure, I had no intention of profiting from the rooms. They were to house my delve team and eventually the crew for my skyship.

“I am sorry, Loriel, but I am still not interested,” I said clearly. I decided to lighten up my aggressive stance. “I have other plans for the rooms.”

Loriel sat straighter. “Your funds are not bottomless Storme. How will you finance your skyship?”

Everything clicked into place. Loriel was helping me generate funds for the skyship. I guess if she looked at the building plans it was not difficult to figure out the hanger and large doors were intended for a skyship.

I tempered my reply, “I will figure things out in time. I am in no rush. I have done you favors and you have done me some. Our scales are balanced and I wish to remain out of your orbit.” Bylura eye’s widened and Isla looked at Loriel for her reply.

Loriel gripped her cup tightly. She clearly had plans and I was messing with them. “Agreed. Neither of us owes the other a debt at this time. When you require a favor of my I will let you know the price. Bylura with me. We return to the capital.” Loriel rose and left in hard steps. Bylura chased after her. That just left Isla and me at the table.

“Can I walk you back to Hen’s Hollow?” I asked the woman who seemed a bit shocked at everything.

“Yes, yes you can. You know she was only trying to do you a favor. A big favor.” I looked her in the eye as she gathered her things.

“It is not a favor if it is expected to be returned in the future at a much higher cost. I do not need Loriel,” I said walked toward the exit. I think a heard Isla say, ‘she needs you’, in a whisper but I couldn’t quite make out the words clearly.

On the walk, we turned to business. She updated me on the construction, furniture and all the little things she was keeping track of. We would be visiting the warehouse tomorrow on 7th day and I was excited to see the progress. She even had a meeting scheduled with the artist. I walked her all the way back to the inn in Hen’s Hollow before turning towards the woods. My aether pool was full and I wanted to level up my *lightning reflexes* spell.

It was extremely late when I got back to my room. Gareth had decided to sleep elsewhere. I cleaned the room and fell into my bed. Level seven and two evolutions. It had taken 6 hours and a lot of chasing of small wild animals but I had gotten excellent results. At level five I increased my speed to 66.6%. At level seven, I took the controlled deceleration. For one I had run into two trees in the night and had to heal my injuries. But also, I think this aspect of the spell might counteract the change of inertia enchantment that Leon had used on his weapon. Maybe I could use such an enchanted weapon with no backlash!

I couldn’t sleep in my privacy cocoon as I was extrapolating all the options of being able to use such a spell in combat. That coupled with my 66% enhanced speed….maybe I could beat Callem. It was all dreams of fancy, and when morning arrived Gareth was not back. I had to meet Isla at the skyship platform. I was slightly worried about my friend. Maybe it was time to get my communication stones.

I was cooking breakfast when Gareth entered, following his nose. Where did he come from? Was he back with Brianne? “Morning Stormy! What are you making us for breakfast?” I had only gotten enough to make myself breakfast so I indicated he needed to get the ingredients himself.

When he returned, I asked him. “I noticed you didn’t return last night Where did you make you bed?” I whispered so no one could overhear. His eyes panicked just for a second before he answered.

Slowly he said while watching for my reaction, “I slept in the twin’s room.” It was a little bit of a gutshot. I liked the twins. Mera had said she had a crush on me.

“I am sorry brother but after we had dinner in the city and got back here we were hanging out in there room and I just kind of fell asleep between them.” He looked guilty and continued, “We just got a little handsy….and kissed a bit.”

My stomach knotted as I was definitely upset, but I tried not to show it. “Gareth it is fine.” I calmed myself, “They both respect you a lot and are good people. Just don’t hurt them.” What was I saying? I was giving my friend the blessing to pursue two women. I needed to get out of here. I finished making the baked breakfast quiche and packed a bunch in my bag. I left to meet Isla at the Skyship pad.

Isla was waiting for me. I was happy to have this distraction today. What did I care if Mera and Gareth were getting intimate? I still had Mia, Aelyn and half a dozen other women who made advances on me. I was also in the middle of a growth spurt and approaching 6’. I also had my magic. That would be my true mistress to keep me warm at night.

The skyship landed, and we boarded. I sat inside the passenger cabin instead of watching the land pass below. Isla sat next to me with her overstuffed satchel. She could sense my mood because we didn’t talk the entire trip. As we approached Aegis city, I moved to the bow to see my building as we landed. It was something substantial and had permanency.