Chapter 53 (Arc 2 Chap 7) Aegus City

I headed to the stands to sit with Callem, Wynna, Ennet, my parents, Gareth’s parents, the twins, and Mia.  Callem went up the stands and talked with Elmore while I got condolences from everyone.  My mother hugged me and fingered the hole in my leather vest and shirt where the sword penetrated.  I guess that could t have been pleasant to watch.  The twins were seated behind me and patted my shoulder.  Mia just voiced that I had fought extremely hard and was sorry I lost.  I didn’t have the heart to tell everyone I lost on purpose. I had done a good acting job as my father didn’t think it was intentional and thought my parry was too slow.

This support was good to feel but it wasn’t long before Gareth was headed back onto the arena floor.  He was scanning the stands vigilantly, probably looking for me since I was not in our preparation room and Callem must have told him I lost.  Somehow he found me and pointed his sword in my direction and made the hand sign we used for blood brothers.  When the fight started it was over in a brief moment, Gareth feinted and got a solid strike below the man’s knee.  It was a crippling blow and was followed by the flat of Gareth’s sword to his temple, knocking him out.

Less than 20 seconds and it was over,  Gareth raised his sword to me again and made our blood brother sign.  If the man I lost to managed to win his next match, he would face Gareth in the finals.  We had to wait as the semi-final academy Annuals match was next.  The two combatants were extremely proficient, both wielding long swords and shields.  The combat was intense and I guessed both could give Gareth a run for his money.  They were 5 to 7 years older.  The match was won when the slightly shorter fighter blinked behind the other one.  The other man was waiting for this and thrust behind himself and rolled away.  Callem leaned down to me to whisper.

“His short-range teleport takes too long and leaves him dizzy.  It was foolish to try it in this competition.  I’m going to talk with Gareth to help him prepare for the finals.  You can’t come so don’t ask,” Callem rose and left the seats.  Laura came down from her seat and pulled me to the side.

“Gareth told me you threw your match.  I suspected that the parry was terrible and I thought your opponent used an ability on you.  It was an entertaining match and you made me proud.” We returned to our respective seats.  I was glad to not have disappointed Elora.

I spent the next twenty minutes talking with the twins and Mia while the man who defeated me fought like a madman.  I guessed he was tasked with winning this match instead of losing.  The fight got bloody fast as both fighters cut each other numerous times and used their abilities for advantage.  Mera kept saying how well I had done to make it this far.  She was trying to cheer me up but I felt a little pain bowing out. Being in the crowd gave me a slight longing to be in the arena.

The man who had defeated won similarly.  His opponent missed a parry from fatigue and took a blade through his lung.  The frothy blood was a clear sign it was over and the match ended as the healers came out to attend to both.  The winner glanced up and I followed his gaze.  The Triumvirate box…all three of them.  I saw Lorien in one and she met my gaze in the stands.  Although she was 80 yards away I felt a chill go down my spine. I leaned into Wynna as the crowd was loud, “Wynna how old is Lorial Miadon?”

Wynna followed my gaze to the box and the young woman.  “22 I think.  Maybe 21, she started academy early and just finished.”  She looked at me and continued, “Come on Storme you are smarter than that.”

I mumbled to myself, “unfortunately I am not.”  I saw Callem climbing the stairs toward us.  He sat with us.

”Gareth wasn’t in the room,” he said concerned.  Everyone in our group started talking at once and Callem hushed them.  “He is in no danger.  They just didn’t want me to give him advice before the finals.  It is a typical mind game and I already warned Gareth about it.”

We waited almost an hour before the final matches began.  We were entertained by tumbling troops and illusion magic.  The young woman around me watched fascinated.  I was sweating from the heat of the crowd and every time I looked at the triumvirate boxes Loriel seemed to be looking at me.  In the center box, clearly marked with the Bricio family crest, were several men dressed in black.  It didn’t take me long to locate Abaddon.  He was Cilia’s age and wearing a captain’s uniform for the navy.  His black hair, eyes, and uniform made him look like a model villain.  Slicked back hair and teeth too white to be natural.  I burned his visage to my memory. It was to make sure I gave him a wide berth.

Gareth entered and looked like a cobra ready to strike.  Just from his eyes and his confident walk his opponent was already timid.  Having already fought the man I knew Gareth had an easy track to the championship.  Gareth spared a glance at me in the stands and a nod.  When the fight started it was over just as quickly.  Gareth twirled and swung a lightning-fast attack taking off the man’s right hand.  He fought on briefly with one hand but Gareth disarmed his weapon with a hard strike.  The man quickly conceded.

The crowd erupted and I joined them.  Gareth was dominant and left no doubt.  It was as Callem had envisioned, maybe a year earlier than planned but Gareth was now going to be the focus of many wanting noble families.  He probably should have made it closer but the anger at me intentionally losing had probably clouded his vision.

We had to wait for the last match before the ceremonies.  The final of the academy Annuals was must closer and featured some fire magic and illusion magic.  The purists hated that abilities were allowed in the Annuals but it had become so hard to discern if someone was using an ability or not.  Spells were only allowed if they were not ranged spells which made little sense as ranged abilities were allowed.  In the end, it didn’t matter as I never planned to participate again.

When the final match ended the smell of charred flesh filled the stadium and the winner sported his burns proudly.  Could I have functioned with so many burns? Probably not. The awards were next.  The second placers got a hefty coin pouch.  The man who defeated me did not look happy with the reward and glanced up at the Bricio booth.  I did as well and Abaddon looked malicious in returning his gaze to the man.  I told myself it was not my problem and waited for Gareth to receive his award.

Gareth was introduced to cheers and approached the administrator who made a show of giving him a collection of large gold coins.  To Gareth’s credit, he wasn’t impressed with the wealth.  If he hadn’t spent dozens of platinum coins he might be a little more appreciative.  His next reward got oohs and ahs from the crowd.  Two dungeon essences were put before Gareth.  Both were tier 1 and he could choose just one.

The gifted was Gunder Miaden.  Third in line for the Miaden triumvirate seat.  He explained what the two essences were.  The first was a nascent aether core.  It awakened an aether core for someone who didn’t have one.  It was an extremely weak awakening Wynna whispered to me.  The second essence was the tier 1 ability called hasten dream.  It allowed a person to sleep for just 2 hours and get a full night’s sleep.  I willed that Gareth gets the nascent aether core but after a brief hesitation grabbed the other essence.  I facepalmed.

Two new tier 1 essence were added for the next winner to select from the three. The first was a hardy essence, allowing a person to require no food and sustain themselves with aether essence.  The other was a clear-sight essence.  Improvising the vision of the person using it.  The man reached for the nascent core but then picked the clear-sight essence.  Wynna whispered that would give him a lucrative job as a spotter on a skyship.  I thought both had made a mistake and said so to Wynna.  She said most people had trouble learning magic spells and the nascent core would only give a core at 2-3 in relative essence.  It wouldn’t expand like a normally awakened core.

I still didn’t agree.  Gareth could have learned the cleanliness spell and stopped bothering me about evolving the spell to include him.  The fanfare lasted an hour and I was impressed with the stamina of those in the stands.  It had been about a nine-hour event start to finish.  I walked with everyone back to the skyship dock and Gareth joined us.  We fell back of the pack and talked.

“Stormy I can’t believe they made you lose your match.  That is pig shit.  I got you some revenge though,” he was all grins.

“Yeah about that Gareth…they gave me 10 platinum to lose.” He looked in shock at me, not believing it.

“And you took it?” He sputtered.

“Of course.  Business decision.  I wasn’t going to win and it was one of the families that asked me to do it. Of course, I might have drawn the eyes of another family because of it.  Just one big mess no matter what I decided.  Anyway, we didn’t you take the nascent aether core!” I said sounding irritated.

“Business decision Stormy, I was offered a platinum not to select it.  Plus I can now train 6 more hours a day with my new ability!” I rolled my eyes at my friend.

“You do realize you could have learned the cleanliness spell with a core?” I said as he suddenly appeared shocked.

He cheered up quickly though, “Probably wouldn’t have the patience for it.  Too much studying. I remember how long your first spell took.” The conversation fell to talking about the matches.  Gareth had been so angry that I had been forced out that he ended that match as quickly as possible.  It had been what I had assumed so I wasn’t surprised.

When we all boarded the skyship the party was more subdued than when we had almost the entire town on board.  The preferred beverage was a sweet wine provided by Ennet and Wynna.  I drank two cups and started to feel woozy so ended my drinking there.  The twins were hanging on Gareth the champion like grapes on a vine.  When the ship docked and we moved to the center of town to celebrate with everyone I found Mia on one arm and Aelyn on the other.

Instead of retreating this time to my room, I enjoyed the celebration with the townsfolk.  Somehow I ended up in a corner with Mia and we kissed drunkenly for a few minutes until a drunk Aelyn came and sat between us.  I had had six…maybe seven drinks so I couldn’t focus.  I knew my healing spell could erase the effects so I was going at it steadily.  I leaned into Aelyn to kiss her since she took away my partner and our lips met briefly.  Then she looked ashamed and left.  Mia was in a mood after Aelyn’s antics so we just went and sang some songs and danced poorly.

My head felt two sizes too big when I woke.  It took me time to figure out where I was.  I was in Ennets house on her couch.  I guessed Callem deposited me here.  I sat up and my stomach protested.  I tried standing and my stomach beat me to it.  The pinkish vomit seemed to never end as I cleared the contents of my stomach.  I immediately focused and cleaned the mess up with my spell then focused on curing my hangover.  It was imperfect.  My head still felt slightly like cotton but I felt much better.  Wynna came out of the room and looked around, expecting to see a large mess.

“I already cleaned it up,” I said slightly embarrassed.

She nodded as Ennet emerged as well to see the nonexistent damage to her house.  Wynna spoke first, “Callem will be up shortly to take you to Aegis city.  Are you still planning to go today?”

I nodded, “Yes I have to release the wolfkin from my service sooner than later.  I don’t want it hanging over my head.”

Callem emerged and looked a little haggard himself. I hadn’t seen him too much last night as the adults had their own party. “Let’s go Storme. The ship leaves in 20 minutes.”

We walked to the platform that overlooked the barracks and boarded. I could see the over students emerging to Aelyn’s calls. I was saving myself from that. I reached out and healed Callem of his minor hangover. He just grunted in appreciation and mumbled something about not being as young as he used to be.

The flight was a 90-mile trip to the other side of the island. We passed over Solaris first and some rage built in me seeing the city. I had effectively been ostracized from that city due to the red-haired punk and his little gang. Callem seeing my anger spoke to me, “Don’t worry Storme. I have talked to several people and progress has been made in cleaning up the city guard. You should have another crack at Leon Mogensen. The first-year academies will be sparing against each other in a few weeks.

That was good news. Callem had my back, albeit a little late. I watched the unfamiliar terrain below and the towns I had never visited and the places I had never explored. I started to feel the itch to visit these places. There was so much more to the World Sphere than just Hen’s Hollow. As we approached the city it had tall buildings like the capital of Skyhold, just not as tall or aesthetically pleasing. The old ship we were on lumbered in an arc before landing among six other ships.

Callem informed me, “Aegis had a much harder time in the recent attack by the Sadians. They are still rebuilding the upper city. As we disembarked Bylur approached us, “Stormy thought you might be on the only ship from Hen’s Hollow today. I apologize by Loriel wanted to make sure I was seen with you. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Her melodic voice was at least pleasant even if she was employed by a scheming woman. Callem looked the wolfkin over.

“Runt?” He asked with some inflection in his voice. The young wolfkin had a sour face. At least I thought that was how I should read it.

“Yes,” she said with sadness.

Callem explained, “Storme runts birthed by the wolfkin for theWolfsguard are usually put down. Sometimes,” he indicated Bylur, “they are made into companions for younger members of the triumvirate families.” I nodded and he continued. “They usually don’t count toward their allocation of Wolfsguard troops. But they can never be trained in combat.” That last little bit had me cock an eyebrow and Callem nodded affirming my suspicion. Bylur moved like she was trained in combat.

Bylur interrupted us and said, “I found three properties you may like Storme in this district. Shall we check them out?”

“Go ahead Bylur, we wil follow.” I said and Callem and I feel in behind her.