Chapter 116 Negotiations

On the evening of the seventh day, Gareth came and took his things from his room. I was still going through all the paperwork but heard him talking to someone in the hallway. I walked in while he was packing with a woman I recognized from the Dungeon Academy, probably his newest girlfriend.

We met eyes, and the woman left to let us talk, “Gareth, you do not have to vacate the room. Even if you want to go off on your own, you will always have a place here.”

Gareth turned slowly, looking at the room, “Last week, when I asked Remy for an advance on my pay, he said you told him I could no longer draw wages I had not earned, Storme.”  His steely gaze softened slightly, “I was angry at first, but then I thought about it.  I worked hard on the last delve to earn my wage.  We had the biggest harvest ever.  Then Talia is arguing with me that I was reckless, and Ullmark defended her words.”

“So, you realized they were right and you were wrong?”  I said pleadingly.

“No, I wasn’t wrong.  We could have gone even harder.  You baby your delve teams too much, Storme.  And it is not just that,”  He inhaled deeply before continuing, “At the party, Callem said you need me at your side to protect you.  He made it sound like I was just a tool for you, Storme.  You have grown so far past me.  I just always thought we would grow together and be equals.”  He packed some more things quietly and paused,  “We are not.  I will lead the most successful dungeon-delving team Skyholme has ever seen.  When that day comes, we can talk again about being equals.”

I could tell Gareth was torn and hurting on the inside. For being almost 6’8” and thick with muscles, he was awfully sensitive.  I said, “Gareth, we will always be blood brothers.  If you ever need anything from me, just ask, and it is yours.”  I moved in for a hug, and he returned it.

He stepped back, bent down, and reached into a hidden pocket on his boot, and pulled a platinum coin out of each boot.  “There is one thing I wish to purchase for you.  Once I assemble my delve team, I will want weapons for each of them, four in total.  I know two platinum is not enough to cover your work, but I will take what you think is fair.”

Gareth was really paying me with my own coin? I was actually surprised he still had these coins. Especially if he was drawing early wages from Remy. Maybe this was symbolic for him. Giving up the coin. But then again, I had made over a dozen weapons with my skill for Gareth over the last year, and each was already quite valuable. He could sell them and live a pampered life. I took the coins, “I will do it, Gareth. Make your requests in two weeks time.”

He hesitated, realizing I would not drop everything to fulfill his request, “Two weeks. Storme,” he held out his hand, and we shook and echoed, “Blood Brothers.”

I was torn as the woman returned and helped Gareth pack. I returned to my room and distracted myself, training the cats. I had the privacy spell going, so I could not hear him leave. After I was sure he had left, I focused on making long swords for my trip back to Llorth.

The following day, I felt hollow, like a part of me was missing. I went through my routine and went to the Academy in the morning. With my intense focus, I imprinted the arcane web spell in class today. I did not make a big fuss about it as I was already getting a few looks from my classmates. The rumors of what had happened at the party were filtering to Titan’s Shield Island. Soon, everyone would know I was a named High Mage of Skyholme.

I still planned to attend my classes. At least the ones I valued. Access to Mage Instructor Neelan’s library was too much of a boon. After the spell class, I went to his library to return a book and borrow another. He was sitting at his desk waiting for me.

Mage Neelan smiled brightly, “High Mage! I must say thank you for the invitation. It was a most delightful evening! I talked with so many fascinating people from the Sadian Kingdoms!”

I winced at being called High Mage but realized I needed to get used to it. “I am glad you enjoyed it. I am just here to return a book and borrow another.” I held up a book titled, Understanding the Differential Aether Costs of Spells by Their Tier.

Neelan stood, “You had it copied like the others? There is no way you could be reading and processing these books so fast. We don’t you just tell me what books you want to be copied, and I will have them sent out. It will save you a lot of time, High Mage.” He added High Mage with a chuckle. “You do realize that Selina thought after being named High Mage, you would have run to the Mage Academy in the Skyhold and asked for tutelage again!”

“She is going to be waiting a long time by the door then,” I laughed, and he joined me. We went through his shelves, and he marked every title I wanted with his magical fingerprint so he wouldn’t forget. I gave him the two platinum coins Gareth had given me to get started. It was a little over a thousand books on a myriad of knowledge. Almost his entire library took him a lifetime to accumulate. A few of the books were spelled and could not be copied with magical means, so they would need to be transcribed by hand.

“My office is always open, High Mage Storme. If you ever get another invitation, please do not hesitate to include me. Amazing food and conversations! I would gladly pay you for the right! Your skyship was also the most remarkable thing I have seen in the skies over Skyholme. Truly, you are a jewel of the Islands,” we shook, and I left.

Although Neelan sounded genuine, and I believed he was, I would have to be weary of people trying to placate me with words because of the title. It was fairly late when I returned to the Shiny Platinum. Going through over a thousand book titles took time. I found Bylura waiting for me.

“Storme, Loriel is nearby and wants your decision. You have made one, I hope,” she asked.

“She came come up to my room, and we can discuss my conditions,” I said to the small white wolfkin.

I had just finished feeding the cats when a knock came at the door. I opened it to find Bylura, Loriel, and Gammon. The cats seemed hesitant at the new people but flanked me at my feet, and their tentacles waved defensively and threateningly.

Loriel’s eyes went up in surprise, “I heard you had some displacer beasts but I didn’t think they would be so cute!” She moved to pet them, and I tensed my hand in silent command, and Kiara and Adrial hissed at Loriel.

“I guess they don’t like you,” I said, scooping them up and bringing them into the room to lock away.

Loriel sighed, “I saw your hand command, Storme. You told them to do that.”

“Yes, but as you can see their training is coming along well,” I said after returning from the room.

“I have never sheard of a white one before,” Loriel stated. “That has to be rare unless it is a variant species?”

“No, Kiara is an albino cat. You can tell because her eyes are red. She is extremely rare and quite intelligent.” I motioned to the table where I had the folders. “Let us see if we can agree on some things.”

Gammon waited outside while Bylura sat off the sofa and had a pad to take notes. I slid my list of demands across to Loriel, who narrowed her eyes as she saw how long the list was. She inhaled deeply and went to the first point, “Why do you need the nine square miles of woodland around the property?”

“It was part of the original estate that also included the dungeon,” I pulled the indicated paperwork and handed it to her.

“But you are not requesting the dungeon itself? Just the lands adjacent to it. I do not see why. Do you plan to develop them?” She asked with curiosity.

“No. I just don’t want anyone else to develop them. I like my privacy, for one. Second, I do not want any surprises in the future,” I gave my reasons.

Loriel thought for a moment, “Any land on the capital island is valuable. I can convince the Triumvirate to cede the land to the estate with a tax of 300 gold a year, but if it is developed in any way, then the tax rate will be reevaluated.”

“Agreed,” I said without hesitation. It was wooded and only had a wide path to the dungeon on it. Nine square miles was a large amount of large on any island. Loriel was shocked for just a moment at my quick agreement. Maybe I could have negotiated the tax down, but what was three platinum to me? She moved on to my second point.

“You want access to the dungeon for an entire day, every week, without any fees? That is 12 months…seven weeks in a month….eighty-four delving days….even at a discounted rate that is nearly one thousand gold Storme. You can not seriously consider this a sane request.” Loriel argued.

“I agree. That is why I have established a fee structure for enchanting Harbingers and Wasps.” I slid a paper to her, and her eyes popped at my numbers.

“It was assumed you would continue to offer your services in this regard to benefit the people of Skyholme,” she said, looking up, her eyes tightening.

“My rates are half the cost of an expert artificer. I know my work is better than any in the yards, and I do the work in one day that takes five people a week,” I stated with a grin and confidence, knowing I had her. If she would charge me to use the dungeon, I would reciprocate. I was asking a modest twelve hundred gold for every wasp and two thousand gold for every Harbinger.

“Maybe we could look at the dungeon again,” Loriel picked up the paper.

“No, these are my terms. The opportunity has passed. I will consider all my past work compensated. Any new work going forward will be at these rates, and I will require at least ten days notice before the work is to be done,” Loriel bit her lip, and I knew my artificing work was probably the largest reason why they had rushed me to the rank of High Mage.

“How about to make matters simpler, we will call the work on a Wasp one thousand gold and the work on Harbinger two thousand gold. We will credit your taxes up to a ten-year period before paying any returns on your work,” Loriel offered.

I considered before replying, “Any refurbishments will be at the full listing no matter the extent of the work completed.” Loriel eyed me uncomfortably again. Because the aether burned away the gold and platinum of skyships when they were run, the largest task was to repair the damage. It was a quick job for me with my skill but very laborious for other artificers. By her countenance, I think she might have an inkling that I was not using a skill but an ability.

Not that it mattered anymore. By naming me High Mage, she was essentially shouting from the rooftops that I was one of the four most powerful users of aether in Skyholme. It took her a long time, and she also kept looking at the rest of my list. She was weighing something in her mind. Even Bylura, on the sofa taking notes, was getting uncomfortable at the length of the pause.

“We need two Harbinger’s refurbished,” she admitted. “Do those two skyships, and then your agreement will hold as stated.” She was asking for me to do four thousand gold worth of work for free.

I pretended to be upset with the condition before nodding, “Fine.” Loriel looked a little relieved, and I was starting to wonder if maybe the purse strings were a little tight at the moment. The Trivumverate had pushed through the construction of a number of skyships, so I would be surprised. It also made sense then that they did not want to pay me but credit me on future taxes instead.

Loriel was onto my third point. I did not want the fifty to one hundred guardsmen to be conscripted to fight for the Trivumverate where they needed them. If I paid for their training, equipment, and salaries, I did not want them taken from me.

Loriel said, “Your next two points can be looked at together. We can not do a grace period of one hundred days. The first trade ship arrives in forty-two days. If you do not have a ship and guards in place, I will have to land the Heaven’s Reach to cover the clause. We need to be certain the children of the families have someplace to flee to if we are betrayed,” she explained.

She tried to sound conciliatory, but I realized she had orchestrated everything to get her ship moored at the Black Spire with her little army. I did have a dangerous plan, but it was a plan that should work. Did I want to risk people to accomplish it though. I weighed my decision back and forth and finally nodded, “Ok, if I do not have fifty men and a skyship in forty-two days then your ship can land there and assume the duties until I can find one.”

Loriel shook her head, “No, the investment in the men and ship would be too significant for me to relocate and would exceed my allowable count of personal armsmen. They would have to remain.” Wow, she was being blatantly honest with her false smile.

“Fine. The point is agreed upon,” I said with coldness. I was sure she had plans to prevent me from fulfilling the obligation on Skyholme, so I would have to do so in the lowlands. It said nothing about foreign armsmen in the contract. I had read it multiple times to confirm.

She smiled, “That makes your next point moot. Either you have the ship and men, or I will dock the Heavan’s Reach.” The point had read that under no circumstances was Loriel to ever dock one of her ships at the Black Spire. She thought she had won.

She immediately capitulated my next point for all the information on where Aelyn and her mother might have gone, “I will have the information delivered to the Shiny Platinum when I return to the capital.”

She read my last point and sighed like a mother, “Storme, you know I can not consent to this last point. As High Mage, we need you at formal events. It is a duty of the title.”

I smiled a little evilly, “I know! I read up on it today when I found a book in Instructor Neelan’s library. Did you know I can be excused if I am not present on the island and away for personal reasons? I only need to return the invitation when I receive it with condolences.”

I momentarily got Loriel speechless, “I was not aware of the condition.” She was aware that I had a skyship and could leave anytime for personal reasons.

“I assure you it is real. It was in a book titled Duties and Responsibilities of the High Mage of Skyholme. Back when it was written, there was only one High Mage, but Neelan assured me the rules contained within have not changed.” I said smugly. Neelan had pointed out the book to me almost immediately when we started going through his collection.

“Storme, you need to give me something. Seven events a year?” She asked.

“One,” I replied.

“Six,” was her counter.

“One,” I repeated.

“Five,” she said a little harshly.

“One and the event two nights ago counts,” I said, standing and stretching.

“No, I need more. Four, and not including the recent reception. You were not officially named High Mage until after it started!” She was getting a little angry. I think that meant I was winning.

“Two annual events. I must be notified four weeks in advance, and we will not count the reception. For others, I am allowed to send my apprentice in my stead,” I offered.

Loriel still seemed to be steaming as she paced. Bylura, on the leather sofa, looked slightly worried. If Loriel just told me why she wanted me at events, we wouldn’t have to go through all this subterfuge. “Agreed. I will draw up the papers for you to sing them!” She stormed out. Bylura followed with an apologetic look.

I think I finally got the best of her, and that was not going to be the end of it. After I picked up Blaize in Llorth, I planned to get a new skyship on the cheap. So cheap it would be free. We were going to become pirates. Well, pirates of pirates. We were going to board and take over a pirate ship!