Chapter 81 (Arc 2 Chapter 35)

As the skyship lifted off, I moved to stand next to Gareth.  He spoke, “Thanks for sending everyone to my apartment, Stormy.  I asked the dishwashers to clean it this morning.  Don’t worry, and I tipped them.”  He was all smiles.

I pivoted my approach and decided to try and tell Gareth he would be accountable for the coins and boots from the reward chest. “Gareth, why did you open the dungeon chest?   Doesn’t the team leader decide who opens it?”

Gareth looked puzzled for just a second, “No one else seemed as eager to open it as me.” He deflated a little, “I will defer to Gimble next time. I traded the dungeon coins for Skyholme coins at the Exchange and gave them to Remy.  He handed me six gold coins in exchange.”

That was good news, “And the boots?” I asked.  “Did you give them to Remy as well?”

Gareth’s face flushed, “I was going to ask you to keep them.  My 13th birthday is coming up,” he asked hopefully.

He had been wearing the boots last night and showing them off.  “How about you can keep the boots if you tell Loriel you can not escort her to the *Sowing Festival*.”

Gareth furrowed his brow, “I thought you were not interested in her?  She asked me, Stormy.  It is a Triumverate party.  The food should be great, and she is paying me to escort her.” He quietly added, “I already took her coin.”

I groaned, “Gareth, she is using you.  She is trying to tie you to her.  We talked about this! How she needs friends to shield her from her powerful enemies.”  I didn’t understand how Gareth could be so dense.

“That is what she told me.  She said she needed me as her date to make sure Abaddon Bricio didn’t ask her to dance.  I am going to be her Guardian Knight,” Gareth said with a weak smile.

I got the sense this was going nowhere.  I could ask him as my blood brother, which would probably work, but that felt like I was forcing Gareth.  I decided I would let him proceed, “Fine, Gareth, but just know if you get yourself into trouble at the dance, I will probably get myself into trouble getting you out of your trouble.”

Gareth nodded thoughtfully, “You should just come to the dance as well.  That way, we can watch each other’s backs.  Loriel said Tessa Torrent was going with her half-brother. The guy I defeated in the inter-academy tournament.  I am sure she would prefer to take you instead.”

I smelled a setup.  I hadn’t been able to contain my visible attraction to Tessa, and I sensed Loriel casually dropping that Tessa didn’t have a date was intentional.  She was trying to rope me into her circle indirectly.  “I will think about it,” I said indecisively.

Gareth reached into his pocket and pulled out a communication stone, and handed it to me.  “Loriel gave me the stone.  If you want her to ask Tessa for you, just use this.  The dance is in two weeks, so you should probably ask her sooner than later, Stormy,” he said with a grin.  “And Stormy, can I borrow a few platinum to get something to wear?  I mean, it is a fancy Trivumverate event, so I need to get something in current fashion.”  He had a grin and pleading look on his face.

I was still fuming but remained calm on the outside.  Loriel wanted me to contact her?  Well, that was not going to happen.  I handed the stone back to Gareth.  “If Tessa needs a date, then she can come to Hen’s Hollow and ask me herself.” Figuring Tessa wouldn’t lower herself to come to Hen’s Hollow and beg for me to escort her, I figured the topic was done.

My relationship with Gareth felt strained as we began academy classes the next day. Loriel was succeeding in driving a wedge between me and my best friend, my brother. I tried to mend things with Gareth. I told him he could keep the boots in exchange for four weeks of not receiving his 6 gold a week salary for being a member of the delve team. I planned to take Gareth back to the capital island on the 7th day and buy him an outfit for the *Sowing Festival*.  That would keep him away from Loriel on this day off and hopefully give us time to reaffirm our bond.

When I was in class with Selina to start the week, I explained how I achieved constant aetheric flow in my aether core.  I needed to make a model to show her the shape.  I made a weird round donut to explain how the aether was flowing.  When I explained the small gravity plate inside, she became extremely interested, “Storme, that is ingenious. We need to experiment on your core.  We need to see if it remains stable when you get knocked out. When you enter an aether dead zone. When you drain a large amount of aether when you add more fixed constructs, and if your growing aether core affects the structure and functionality.” I already knew draining my core didn’t affect my aether cycling as I had made mithril recently, and it remained intact.

My face paled a little bit at the various possibilities of testing the others, “Are all those things really necessary?”

Selina had an incredulous expression, “Storme, if you are engaged in combat, do you really want your aether core to become unstable?”

Selina’s hard gaze subdued me.  The next few days, we tested the stability of my aether core.  Selina knocked me out with electricity, a blow to the head, a mind black spell, a sleeping potion, and a concussive blast.  Yeah, it was not a good few days.  The aetheric flow was not disturbed, but Selina could attack my aether core directly and disrupt the flow with a *aetheric drain* spell.  It caused an imbalance as the drain came from one point on my aether sphere. This caused massive heartburn for me, and I had to fight through the pain with my focus exercises to remain functional.

Selina offered, “If you want, I could loan you my spellbook for *Aetheric Fortress*.  It is a tier 3 spell and serves to prevent others from manipulating and draining your aether core.  Usually, mages learn the spell so devices can not be used to subdue them and contain their aether core.”

“That would be most generous of you.  I have never heard of the spell,” I asked, interested.

”I got the spell in low lands a few decades ago.  It was in the halfling city of Fareth.  They had a strong opposition to slavery and a few spells available in their Mage University to counter it. This was the most powerful one,” Selina explained.

I asked, “Would this spell break Aelyn’s indentured mark?”  I waited for Selina’s response anxiously.

She considered the question and then said, “No.  It might have prevented someone from casting a binding spell on them, but it won’t cancel the  spell already cast.”  My face fell.  She added, “The spell can only be cast on yourself. It requires an anchor point in your aether core as well.  Each evolution just increases your defensive strength.  Every five evolutions increase the spell’s tier effectiveness which starts at tier 3.  So are you interested?”

“Absolutely. Even though it will take four slots on my spell matrix it sounds like it is more than worth it,” I said without having to think too much. Selina dug through the bag and handed me the well-worn and small book. I opened the spellbook, and the writing was small—that was right, she said it was from a halfling community. At least the script was in the common tongue. The spell forms didn’t look too complex, either.

“You can put that away. We are not done testing your innovation for stirring your aether core,” she said with a devious smile.

On the third day of the testing, I added a second washer with an inverse gravity plate on the outside. This was Selina’s idea, and it had a lower gravitational pull-push than the center planes. This allowed me to control the flow more. Selina ended up getting upset as her she was circulating her aether in the disc method that she had instructed me to learn. My new method was much easier to learn and more efficient and stable.

Selina explained, “Circulating your aether along a predefined path for a long time is like a river carving into rock over time. At a certain point, you can no longer alter your flow. It usually cements itself after about five years of constant flow along a path. Your method just sets the boundaries in this—donut shape, you called it. The gravity plane is innovative, but the shape combined. I need to write a paper on this, Storme.” Her anger at her own core being fixed was overwhelmed with the prospect of adding to magic knowledge.

Selina continued, “The sphere is vast, Storme. I have traveled about 20,000 miles from Skyholme but have only seen a tiny amount that the Sphere offers. I am certain your method has been discovered and used out there somewhere, but in the dozen magical academies I have visited, your method has not been detailed in any of them.”

I processed what Selina had said, “So is this information valuable?”

Selina grinned madly, “Very. If my guesses are correct, this method should expand your aether core more than normal growth using the exercises. Don’t ask how much. It will depend on how fast the aether circulates. But will make mages much more powerful.”

On the fourth day, we found a weakness in my method. The aether units in the core needed to be over 50 in order to have enough density to keep the circulation going. When I emptied my aether, it got unstable. My total was so high, and with the circulation replenished so quickly that even when I emptied my aether core, it took less than ten minutes to draw in enough aether to stabilize again. Ten minutes was not enough time for the structure and the gravity plates to completely destabilize. Selina said my aether paths would be so engrained after five years it wouldn’t even matter.

Selina asked, “So, Storme, when I write this paper do you want your name on it? I am going to have to reveal that I am Sana Velin if I am going to publish the paper at the Magus Academy in the capital. That should be fun,” she groaned.

I thought about it and finally said, “Use my alias, Stormy Skye.” A confused Selina started laughing. I added, “Gareth gave me the name.” I started laughing at the absurdity of the name as well. We agreed on the point, and the paper would not be submitted until the end of the academy year. Selina was going to try to alter her own aether flow in her core but didn’t sound optimistic.

After dinner and the lecture on the fourth day, I was in my room alone. Gareth had taken to getting some extra training in after dinner. It was because of his failure in the dungeon. I knew this because he was wearing his helmet when I saw him training. I only went to Twin Rocks on 1st, 3rd and 5th days now so I could get more rest.

I was working on imprinting my *tissue extraction* spell. After I imprinted this spell, I would either work on the *aether fortress* spell, *invisibility* spell, or the *absolute time* spell. I was leaning toward the absolute time spell because it was just tier 1, and I knew I could learn it in about a week. Getting an easy win would be nice. My alarm on my door went off, and I assumed it was Gareth returning early from training, and it was. A grinning Gareth was entering the room but the flash image in my mind from the alarm spell also had someone behind Gareth.

I dropped my privacy spell and stumbled to stand off my bed. Gareth entered the room with a huge grin, and Tessa Torrent walked behind him. I spammed my *cleanliness* spell a few times while putting on a smile. Gareth didn’t say anything and was just grinning while Tessa was looking around the room, curious.

When no one spoke, Gareth heaved a sigh and said, “Storme, Tessa came to visit you and ask you something. We don’t you take her for a walk along the southern stream.” It was a nice walk in the twilight.

I spoke quickly with a note of nervousness, “Yes! Let’s go for a walk along the river path.” I quickly put on my boots under the stare of Tessa while Gareth fell on his bed and relaxed. He looked like he was the cat that just got the cream. Tying my boots, I got control of my excitement and emotions. I stood and moved close to Tessa to direct her out of the room.

When we got outside of the building, Tessa said, “That has to be the cleanest room I have ever seen. Why is your side of the room so sparse? Do you keep all your things at the *Shiny Platinum*?”

I decided to roll with it. With a controlled tempo to my speech, I replied, “I try to keep my important items in a place where they can be best utilized.” I was not going to tell her I had a dimensional storage.

Tessa walked next to me, following my steps as she didn’t know where we were going. Tessa said, “Loriel loaned me her skyship to visit you here. She said if I came here and asked you, you would agree to escort me to the *Sowing Festival*.” Of course, she did, I mused.

“Why do you need an escort to the Festival?” I asked and relaxing. The aura that Tessa exuded seemed to fade.

She hesitated, “There are four galas the Trivumverte hosts at castle Skyhold. The two over the New Year, the *Sowing Festival* and the *Harvest Festival*. There are other minor ones, but these are the political gatherings. All 23 family seats attend, and all important family members get invitations as well. When I received an invitation, I could not decline. If I did, I could be expelled from the family.”

I nodded, pretending to understand the deeper politics, “And why are you here, asking me to be your escort?”

I looked at her, and studied her silvery blonde platinum hair drawn back and weaved into a ponytail. Her light blue eyes were difficult to see in the low light, but they had depth. She was also tall, just an inch or two shorter than me, maybe 6’1”. She turned to me and smiled with mild confidence. Even though she was 14, she was physically mature…appearing 18. “These events are match-making events. When a family member reaches the age of fourteen, their marriage can be arranged. If I have an escort, then you can challenge any attempt to bind me to a marriage contract.”

I frowned, “So you need me to be your hired sword? I am assuming your escort needs to fight or something?”

“No, no. Combat rarely ever happens. Just having you at my side means I can dissent any match the Torrent high seat arranges. Loriel is the 23rd in line, so she can not be forced into any marriage now. When I graduate from the academy, I am to be elevated to the 22nd seat, and my brother will be the 23rd,” Loriel stated.

“So you need me to attend, what four galas every year with you for the next seven years?” I sounded a little testy. I guess I had hoped Tessa actually was interested in me and not my combat skills.

She spoke softly at the harshness of my words, “No, only the *Sowing Festival* has marriage pronouncements. The sowing or planting festival, sometimes called, is the start of the new harvest season and is always followed with new marriage announcements. These days things are so uncertain, and I am more than a little worried. There have been proclamations to encourage families to have more children. Immigration has been so reduced over the last century that there is actually a population decline in Skyholme. The Triumvirate wants the families to show the people the way. Anything can happen, and I am…I am desirable.”

I would have to agree. With her noble looks and firm-fitting leather armor, she was now wearing made her an 11, in my opinion. She had makeup on but defiantly didn’t need it. When I said nothing and studied her, she said, “Loriel said I might have to pay you. What do you require for your services?” She wasn’t begging, but this sounded, to my disappointment, like a business transaction.

If I went to this gala then I could keep an eye on Gareth and make sure he didn’t do anything stupid. Gareth wasn’t dumb, but he was swimming in a pool that he had no idea how to navigate. I sighed, “What can you offer? Just start with your best deal, and don’t try to haggle with me.” I was committing to this.

Tessa was about to speak and then stopped and started thinking about what to say. I waited patiently until she spoke, “I will give you five large gold for an outfit for the event. And you can call on my favor once every year for as long as I reside in Skyholme.”

“What does a favor entail?” I asked with my mind going into the gutter briefly.

“The Torrent family has connections in the city. If you want a token to a specific dungeon, I can make it happen. If you get in trouble with the law, I can arrange to get you released. It is really open-ended.”

I thought for a moment then said, “Can you get my father transferred to Aegis city and promoted so he doesn’t have to ride the skyships?”

Tessa asked a few questions about my father’s job and then said, “It can be done. The transfer can happen before the gala, but the promotion will take a few months.” I think I surprised her with my request, but it would make going to this event worth it.

“Then we have a deal,” I said with a smile and held out my hand. She dug into her belt pouch and produced five large gold coins. I laughed, “I don’t need your coins, just the favor. I was offering my hand so we could shake on the agreement.” She blushed in embarrassment, and her mature visage turned cute.

We shook, and Tessa went to the skyship platform while I returned to my room. Gareth’s grin on the bed was huge and expectant. I just looked at my friend and said, “we will leave on the night of 6th day to get clothes in the capital. We will spend the night at the *Gentle Tauren* and then fly to Aegis city in the morning to make the dungeon delve. Don’t say a word! I am still mad at you for dragging me into this.”

Gareth burst anyway, “Mad at me! You have a date with one of the prettiest women in all of Skyholme, thanks to me!”

I rolled onto my bed, still looking crossly at my friend, and put up my privacy screen. My cross look did transform into a grin as I picked up my spellbook and continued to study.