Chapter 162 Book Three Epilogue

I was inside my dimensional closet.  It had grown substantially when it reached level twenty-three and received another evolution.  The space had continued growing with my aether core as well.  The space was now a twenty-five-foot cube and was still growing.  It was an impressive space for the tier-three spell.  The first floor was crowded with crates of valuable materials we scavenged from the massive skyship, the Sky King. I had four of the six synched crystals stored inside, with the other two powering the Sky Wraith.

When I tracked the Sky King’s monstrous ship to the crash site, my only goal was to find the remaining two synched aether crystals to get the complete set of six.  We had arrived to find debris from the crash spread over nearly a mile, and we were the first ones here to sift through the wreckage.  The two large aether crystals were not difficult to find as they glowed in the low light of night in the Sphere.  We also found a lot of material.  While Bleiz, Cilia, and Leda had been sifting through looking for valuables, I had pulled gold, platinum, and mithril from the destroyed runes with my metal shaping ability.

We had spent nearly two days scavenging before two skyships from the Sadians arrived at the crash site.  I had wanted to return to Skyholme anyway, so leaving the site to them was an easy decision, especially since there was a goblin tribe that kept sending scouts to the crash site.  They fled whenever we tried to confront them, but they were getting bolder.

We had recovered the most valuable loot in the paired crystals anyway.  While we were at the site, we communicated with Isla and Talia through the stones.  I had missed one important thing while away: being with my mother when she saw my father’s body.

When we landed at the Shiny Platinum, I went to her immediately.  The funeral was planned for a week and would be in Hen’s Hollow.  In Skyholme, most people had a small party to celebrate the life of a loved one, and then the body was burned to ash.  The ash was returned to the earth.  My father had an older brother who came with his two children.  I had not seen my uncle in years; he lived on Greatwood Island.  Both his sons were Freya’s age, but I had not seen them in years.

I learned Uncle Dominic had arrived this morning, six days before the service. I found him talking with my mother at the Shiny Platinum. He looked just like my father except not as fit. I think he was a guard like my father. My father did not talk much about him. “This is the famous Storme!” Dominic stood and offered his wrist, “I did not realize Caleb had fathered the famous High Mage of Skyholme!” I shook his wrist.

Mother embraced me, and her puffy red eyes told me I should have been here instead of treasure hunting. “Where is Freya?” I asked.

“She is in Hen’s Hollow making preparations,” Mother said into my chest. I was going to protest, but she added, “Isla, Fera, and Mera are with her. I think they are doing the real work.”

“Is Pascal with them as well?” I knew my brother had survived the attack in Aegis City, but I had not heard anything more than that.

“He entered the employ of Prince Antioch. He fought with the Sadians to recapture the city and impressed them,” Mother said with bitterness. Mother still did not like the Sadians—too much bad blood and the last attack where Freya had almost been killed.

“Prince Antioch is not that terrible a person. He is more of a merchant than a Prince,” I reassured my mother. The third Prince of the Sadian Emperor had arrived to help fight back the Black Mauraders even though he was not a great fighter and convinced the Emperor to send more soldiers.

Uncle Dominic interrupted us, “This is an amazing building you have here, Storme. Your cousins Alfie and Rufus wanted to attend First Year Academy in a larger city. Alurha says Freya is entering the Academy in two years, and it would be good to have family attend with her.”

My opinion of my uncle had just taken a major hit. I knew he was asking if I would support my two cousins to live and attend the Academy in Aegis City. “Freya is attending First Year Academy in the capital. There is a specialized First Year Mage Academy there.”

“Even better. Your mother tells me you have another residence in the capital,” Dominic pressed me to take his sons.

“The Black Spire,” I said flatly. “Mother, I actually need to get back and check on things there. When you need it, I will send the Maelstrom to take you to Hen’s Hollow.” I turned and headed up to my room in the Shiny Platinum, ignoring my uncle. I sighed as I noticed two of the doors had been bashed in, probably by looters. The door to my room was still secure, and I ended the arcane lock I had placed on it days ago.

Entering the room with the slightly stale air was a relief. Bleiz appeared on my right, “I don’t like your uncle. You should keep him away from your mother.”

“My father never talked much about him, but I can see why you don’t like him. He definitely is trying to take advantage of my father’s death.” I shrugged, “He will not get anything from me.”

“He will leverage your mother. I can smell it on him,” Bleiz insisted.

“My mother can make her own decisions. I have a number of things to worry about. Now that I have the crystals, I need to know why the black dragon wanted to get into the tower and explore the ancient mage’s library. I will have to travel to the lowlands with Sana Velin to find someone to open the door,” I told my Wolfsguard friend.

“I am going to sleep for four hours, and then we will go to the Black Spire. Make sure no one disturbs me,” Bleiz nodded, still obviously upset by my uncle. He exited the room, turning invisible as he went.

I was lying in my bed, unable to sleep. The enormity of everything was hitting me. My father, although we had never been close, was gone. Killing the Bricios who had brought the Mauraders here was some modicum of revenge, but not enough. I couldn’t kill all the Mauraders as they were an organization throughout the Sphere and controlled one of the moons with millions of people on it. I needed to continue to get stronger and learn more offensive spells for the future.

My spells had made a lot of progress, and my aether matrix might be large enough to learn the lightning elemental spell finally. I also had two spells that I wished I had during the fight—Telescopic Eye and Flight.

I took the time to pull out the sheet I used to track my spells. I started updating it and looking at my progress as a mage. I had learned 21 spells. At first, my focus had been on a life of comfort, and now, I needed to focus on evolving the spells I had toward more combat orientation and learning spells to match. The telescopic eye was just a tier one air spell, but it would help me make better use of my exchange ability. I would purchase it and learn it when I could.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | **Aether Matrix** |  |  |  |  |
|   | **Imprinted Spell List** | **Tier** | **Slots** | **Affinity** | **Level** |
| 1 | Absolute Time | 1 | 1 | Chronomancy | 13 |
| 2 | Aether Fortress | 3 | 4 | Aetheric | 11 |
| 3 | Aether Shield | 2 | 2 | Aetheric | 20 |
| 4 | Alarm | 1 | 1 | Divination | 24 |
| 5 | Arcane Lock | 1 | 1 | Aetheric | 14 |
| 6 | Arcane Web | 2 | 2 | Aetheric | 13 |
| 7 | Cleanliness | 1 | 1 | Aether | 25 |
| 8 | Comprehend Languages | 1 | 1 | Aether | 3 |
| 9 | Dimensional Closet | 3 | 4 | Space | 23 |
| 10 | Ice Ball | 1 | 1 | Water | 8 |
| 11 | Lesser Restoration | 3 | 1 | Healing | 23 |
| 12 | Lightning Reflexes | 4 | 2 | Lightning/Healing | 28 |
| 13 | Lightning Spear | 2 | 1 | Lightning | 13 |
| 14 | Lightning Sphere | 2 | 1 | Lightning | 8 |
| 15 | Mend Flesh | 1 | 1 | Healing | 18 |
| 16 | Neutralize Poison | 2 | 1 | Healing | 11 |
| 17 | Obfuscate Abilities | 1 | 1 | Darkness | 16 |
| 18 | Personal Invisibility | 2 | 2 | Illusion | 6 |
| 19 | Privacy  | 1 | 1 | Illusion | 20 |
| 20 | Thermostatic Aura | 3 | 1 | Healing | 11 |
| 21 | Tissue Extraction | 3 | 1 | Healing | 7 |

Some spells might have been a waste to learn as I was not finding as much use for them. The absolute time spell was useful, and I was glad I had learned it. My recent evolutions allowed me to set multiple alarms, and I was now able to change the wake-up from a sound to a weak form of the alertness spell. This let me come awake instantly and be focused.

Aether fortress had helped me resist the dragon fear and protected me from having devices and people blocking access to my aether. Every evolution was just strengthing my defenses from being blocked to my own aether.

Aether shield was another spell I was extremely happy I learned. I had received the spell from Admiral Sebastian as a gift for watching after his granddaughter, Cilia. It had started out as a single disc shield, and with evolutions, I could now cover my body in aetheric armor. The only downside to this spell was that when the aether armor was destroyed, it took seconds to be able to recast. The evolution at level nineteen had strengthened the shield, but I think reducing the three seconds for the shield to be able to be recast would be the evolution I choose at level twenty-three.

The alarm spell had a lot of combat utility. Not many enemies had prepared defenses against intense light and loud sound from the level-one spell. It had leveled during the fight over the city, and I had not selected the 23rd evolution myself. It had evolved on its own without direction from me in the heat of combat. It took me a moment to realize that evolution allowed me to not have to anchor the spell to an object. I could anchor it in mid-air. It was not the best evolution, but it happened when you were unprepared to focus a spell as it reached one of the evolution levels.

The arcane lock was another useful spell. I wished I had learned a stronger version of the spell. The more powerful opponents I encountered, the easier it would be to break my tier-one arcane lock. I extended the viability of my locks from 9 to 18 days and slightly increased their strength in the last two evolutions.

I had originally learned arcane web to help in delving into dungeons but found it extremely useful in fighting people. The web now covered a ten-by-ten-foot area and had three evolutions, increasing its stand’s strength. Unless it was dispelled, the web could hold any normal person in place, and if they fell on it or got entangled, it would completely restrain them.

My vanity spell of cleanliness has proved its usefulness a hundred times over. The amount of time I had saved since learning the spell had been invaluable in helping me devote more time to studying and artificing. Now that I could clean others as well, it was probably my favorite spell in my arsenal.

The ice ball spell had been a waste of a slot on my aether matrix. Other than giving me the ability always to have an everlasting ice cube for drinks, I had not found utility in the spell. Lesser restoration was the opposite. The tier-three healing spell could now regrow missing limbs. It would take a lot of aether investment from me, but I was not short on aether. When I returned to the Black Spire, the maimed Wolfsguard would all be restored.

Lightning reflexes was by far the best spell I had learned. The only limitation was casting spells while in a state of speed was limiting. Channeling aether through a spell form on my core took the same amount of time. The spell still turned me from a good swordsman to nearly an unbeatable swordsman. Leveling this spell all the to level twenty-eight was an amazing feat in its own right.

Mend flesh and neutralize poison were specific utility spells in the healing sphere that helped me conserve aether when healing large groups of people. My obfuscate abilities spell was permanently masking my aether core so others could not read my true abilities. It was only a tier one spell and leveled with time, but if I was going to travel the Sphere, I would need to improve its strength or learn a stronger masking spell.

Personal invisibility was another bad choice on my part. It was not a mistake imprinting the spell but only selecting the tier two version of the spell. Bleiz’s necklace acted like a tier three invisibility spell, and I wished I had invested two more spell slots for the tier three version of the invisibility spell. I could mask my sound completely when paired with the evolved privacy spell.

Thermostatic aura had helped preserve my lungs inside a fireball and lessen the effects. Still, it had many evolutions to go before it could completely negate the heat of a fireball. The final spell on my list was learned to harvest inside dungeons. It was a highly sought-after spell in dungeon teams, but I had not used it often enough to level it much.

My large variety of spells would be the envy of most mages. Not only did I have a large and growing aether matrix to imprint spells on, but I also had almost limitless aether when considering the low-tier spells that I used. I spent all four hours reviewing spells, and my absolute time alarm went off.

Bleiz was waiting for me as we headed to the Maelstrom and flew to the Black Spire. The area had been cleaned around the Spire, and the Sky Wraith was docked but had had heavy damage from the dragon and the subsequent crash. Pakkam met me as I stepped off the ramp. “High Mage, it is good to see you safe.”

“Did Isla not tell you I was fine?” I asked the Wolfsguard.

“She did, but seeing you for myself alive is better,” Pakkam noted with a grin.

“How did the Wolfsguard fair in the fight,” I asked the warrior.

“We have forty-two of the Sky Wraith crew alive, some of those injured and not healed yet. Six of Asger’s community died in the attack. In all, seventeen of the Spire residents died,” Pakkam informed me morosely.

I nodded sadly but actually was happy the number was relatively low. “Is Rippon working on the repairs for the Sky Wraith?”

“He is working on the fleet at the Navy docks in the city. All experienced shipwrights were called to help, and he went,” Pakkam informed me. I wanted to talk more with Pakkam, but Princess Amelia walked out of the Spire. The two phantom cats rushed past her and bowled into my legs, purring loudly.

Amelia smiled, seeing the affection the cats were giving me as I kneeled and petted them. Amelia said, “They have been driving everyone crazy trying to get outside to go and search for you.” I could feel Kiara’s phantom limb grasping my legs.

“Maybe I will take them into the dungeon to fight blink bunnies. They are big enough to hunt more than squirrels and rats,” I said, standing. The cats did not leave my heels as I walked toward the Spire.

The Princess stood in my path, “Don’t I get the same greeting as the cats? I guarded them and your sister while you fought to protect everyone.” Her lips turned up into a smile.

“Thank you, Princess. I appreciate everything you and the Principality of Marstom have done for Skyholme,” I acknowledged her with a weak smile. “I am sure Loriel will reward you suitably.”

Her eyes went wide and mischievous, “Oh, you have not heard then! Well, the negotiations are still in the early stages. The Sadian Empire is subjugating Skyholme!”

“What?” I felt like I had just been kicked and betrayed.

“Well, subjugated is a strong word. A free city-state is a better word. Prince Antioch and Loriel Miaden are to wed and rule as equals,” the Princess smiled at my shock at the news. “There are also inquiries of tying Skyholme to the Principality of Marstom by having the High Mage marry a Princess.”

The Princess was grinning and making me uncomfortable. I turned back to Pakkam, “Pakkam, what happened to the Dark Tide?”

Pakkam had an answer for me, “Captain Hyperion is recovering in the capital. The ship has been claimed as his prize, but there is still some conflict about the loot from the city brought on board. As far as I know, all the pirates who helped in the fight have been offered asylum in Skyholme. I do not know if anyone has taken it. If they have bounties with the Adventurer’s Guild, that will have to be settled first.”

“So, Captain Hyperion claimed the Dark Tide? What about the half-elf woman with him?” I asked.

“Aelyn?” The Princess arched her eyebrows at me, but her eyes told me she knew why I had asked. “Loriel has detained her.”

“What! Why?!” I almost yelled at the Princess.

“I don’t know. You would have to talk to Loriel about it,” her eyes danced as my anger rose. Aelyn had brought the pirates here to help fight the Black Mauraders, and Loriel locked her away.

I marched back to the Maelstrom, Cilia, and Leda were leaving, and paused. “I am going to the capital, and you two can rest here.” My voice was laced with anger as they moved aside.

Bleiz joined me, even if I did not want him with me, he might stop me from flying into a rage. I flew the Maelstrom angrily toward Skyhold, and I got to see the damage for the first time. A number of the towers had been destroyed, and multiple buildings collapsed. It was going to take years to clean up the destruction from this attack and rebuild.

I landed, and a very young soldier rushed to me, “High Mage?” he said uncertainly as the cats hissed at him to keep his distance. I walked past him as I knew where to go, the phantom cats on my heels. I walked past a number of servants and soldiers, and the soldier just walked a distance behind me while Bleiz talked to him.

I slammed open the door to a room where I had met Loriel before. The room was empty. The cats both looked ready to pounce, but there was no one here to target. “Where is Loriel?” I asked the soldier angrily.

He stuttered, “The informal dining room, I believe.”

“Where is that?” I barked at him.

He pointed down the corridor, “End of the hallway, take a right, and it will be on your left.” He seemed to reconsider my state of mind too late as I walked in the direction indicated.

In the corridor, two guards flanked a door. They recognized me and opened the door on my approach. The cats were on my heels, ready for a fight. My entrance was not as aggressive as I had hoped since the doors were opened for me. Inside, Loriel was eating at the head of a small table. Across from her was Prince Antioch, and Captain Hyperion and Aelyn were seated as well.

Aelyn did not appear to be a prisoner and wore off-blue but fashionable clothing. Loriel sipped an orange drink, hiding her smirk. Had Princess Amelia tricked me? Loriel spoke first, “High Mage, it is nice for you to come and check in on me finally. How did your salvage operation go?” I noticed a place at the table was set for me next to Aelyn.

Captain Hyperion raised a wine glass, “Your frost mead is most excellent, Storme. If it can be arranged, I would not be opposed to taking a few casks with me.”

Adrial and Kiara were confused. They had expected me to be rampaging now, but I was just stunned. “Aelyn, explain?” I ignored everyone and asked Aelyn.

“We have been waiting for two days for your return,” she said with an arched eyebrow.

“Princess Amelia said Loriel was detaining you,” I accused Loriel.

Loriel smiled, “That is true. All the pirates are. I don’t want word of our weakness to get out before we can regain some our defenses and repair some of the skyships. My guess is the Princess was testing your—obsession with Aelyn here. Would you care to sit and join us, High Mage?”

Somewhat calmed down, I sat next to Aelyn, who appeared healthy and unhurt. Prince Antioch smiled, “We were discussing the difficulty of dealing with the Adventurer’s Guild in regard to the pirate’s crimes. It will take quite a sum to settle some of them, and Skyholme needs the funds for rebuilding.”

“I will pay whatever fee to remove Aelyn’s bounties,” I stated to Loriel. “Is Skyholme being annexed to the Sadian Empire?” I asked of Prince Antioch.

“It is more complicated than that. Loriel and I will be married and ally formally with my father. My wedding gift to Loriel is twelve Sadian ships and two thousand men, and their families will relocate to Skyholme,” he said happily.

“Antioch and I have a very similar outlook on how things should be,” her amused face shifted to a serious demeanor. “Aelyn’s crimes have been vacated for her assistance, Storme. There is no need to worry. I also recognize your contributions to the defense of the islands were unmatched.”

Captain Hyperion whispered loudly to me, “I told her you slew the dragon with some help from me.” He was obviously intoxicated and had a sloppy smile.

Loriel produced some paperwork, “I have here the deed to the Black Spire and the Progenitor Dungeon. They are now in your name and will transfer to your named successor. And,” she added with a grin, “No taxes, will ever be requested.”

Loriel was trying to buy me off with something that was already, in essence, mine. At least now I could leave it to Freya and could travel the Sphere without worry. “So, I will no longer be tied to Skyholme?” I asked pointedly to Loriel.

Loriel frowned, obviously unhappy. I think she thought I would be loyal by giving me the Spire and dungeon without strings attached. She conceded, “No, you do not have any conditions attached to your ownership of the Spire. I hope you consider the duties part of your High Mage title.”

“I will keep a skyship at the Spire with guards. What about the rest of the spoils from those ships that crashed into the island?” I asked clearly seeking more compensation. Maybe I was being greedy after what I got from the Sky King, and I doubted there was anything to match.

Prince Antioch interjected, “As you know, Skyholme needs to be rebuilt, High Mage. All resources need to be directed toward that to establish a strong trade base within the Sphere.”

I had been prepared to offer the six harmonized crystals from the Sky King in order to reestablish the teleportation barrier. Now, I was not so certain. I pulled the books out of my dimensional closet, where I had copied all the runes from the mithril chains, and placed them on the table, “You will need these to protect Skyholome.” I added a block of mithril I had salvaged from the Sky King, roughly the size I had taken from the mithril chains I had stolen. It was a way of unburdening my subconscious guilt.

All eyes focused on the block of mithril. Loriel understood the implications of what I was doing, “Where are you going, High Mage Storme?”

“I will be attending my father’s remembrance service. Then I am going to train in my dungeon, and then I will hunt down every Black Maurader in fifty thousand miles.” I turned to Aelyn, “Are you coming with me?”

There was no indecision in her eyes. She nodded and stood, and we left the dining room together.