Chapter 67 (Arc 2 Chapter 21)

When I entered the adventurer’s hall, there were a lot of men and women lounging and drinking. Much more than last time. I went to the small bar and inquired why. The dungeons were shuttered while the delve teams from the Skyholme monopolized them for two days. I asked if this was a common occurrence, and it was. The Triumvirate ran their own dungeon teams, and when they wanted to, they could jump the queue. I found where Gimble and my team were practicing.

I knocked loudly on the large door and waited. It was Remy who cracked it to see who was there and let me enter. The sight before me was interesting. Gimble looked worn out; Gareth was dirty but had a grin on his face; Sammie was cradling her arm, which looked broken; Lana was sitting in the corner studying the dimensional closet spell. Remy looked relieved that I had just arrived.

I paused in the room and pointed at Sammie. Remy answered, “Just waiting for me to get enough aether to heal it.”

“Who broke her arm?” I asked, but I was already guessing it was Gareth. It was affirmed when Sammie pointed at him.

Gareth defended himself, “It was three on one. I didn’t mean to break it when I threw her. She cut my shoulder in the last round.” I shook my head slowly in disappointment.

“Gimble, how are things going? Your honest assessment if Gareth can fit in on your team.” I asked the mature elf. I had thought Gareth might try to assert himself in the group. Maybe even attempt to displace Gimble.

Gimble’s response surprised me, “It is not as bad as it looks. Gareth listens quite well. Since he defeated me in melee duels, I was working on teamwork attacking with Sammie and Remy in support. Sammie is a bit reckless and better when on her own. Remy was just using his slingshot to distract Gareth but has not learned good timing yet.” He pointed at Lana, “She has zero offensive capability.”

Damn, maybe I should have gotten the *Phantom Fighter* spell instead. I didn’t want to go back and spend more coin at the magic shop, though. I walked over to Lana, “Here is a new spell. Put it in your storage space, and only after learning the dimensional closet spell can you start working on it.” She nodded, and her jaw fell open when she read the cover. She ignored me and paged through it before I gave her a look, and the young woman opened her space and placed the book inside.

I turned to the group. “Ok, I was planning to head back to Hen’s Hollow but I can work out for a bit.” A staff appeared in my hands. I spun it slowly. Gareth’s eyes flashed in worry. “I will take Remy’s place,” A huge sigh of relief came from his corner, “Once Remy heals Sammie you three can attack me to work on your team work.”

A very confused Gareth asked, “Wouldn’t it make more sense for me to be the target?”

“No, you three need to learn to work together. Don’t worry, I will go easy on you, and I can always heal you if I need to,” I said with smugness.

“Wait, you can heal?” Remy squeaked from behind me.

“Just flesh wounds, no bones yet.” I turned to the three. “No head blows or puncture strikes.” I had to wait ten minutes before Remy healed Sammie. Gareth seemed overconfident, and Gimble was cautious.

I launched myself at Sammie getting two quick strikes to her before Gareth and Gimble closed. Gareth’s strike hit my aether shield, and his confusion allowed me to strike his knee up into his groin. A block softened the groin shot with his hand. Gimble was held at bay by my other aether shield long enough for me to get two more strikes on Sammie who collapsed. Gareth tried to move in but I dropped my shield on Gimble and placed both aether shields in Gareth’s direction so I could engage Gimble one on one.

The elf was good. I was tempted to use my *lightning reflexes* spell, but showing my *aether shield* was going to be my limit today. I backed Gimble up, but Gareth flanked me, so I canceled and resummoned an aether shield platform. I ran at Gareth and used the platform to vault over him. I blocked his strike while airborne, but it twisted me slightly, and my landing was going to suck. My staff flashed to get a strike on Gareth’s elbow while I was flying over him. To avoid the painful landing, I activated *lightning reflexes* just before impact to use controlled deceleration from the spell before canceling the spell.

I was surprised that it worked so well as I came to my feet perfectly fine. Gareth’s mouth hung open. Lana’s eyes were wide. Gimble’s face was a mask trying to figure me out. Remy was at my back so I didn’t see him. Gimble spoke, “Sammie can you stand?”

She groaned and got to a knee, “Barely, give me a second.” I waited as she rejoined Gareth and Gimble.

Gareth finally voiced his thoughts, “What the hell Stormy? You have been practicing. And what is with your new spell? Are we keeping secrets from each other now?” His grin told me he was just trying to make me feel guilty. Gimble gave a hand signal and Gareth moved to my left, Sammie straight at me and Gimble to my right.

I moved left to meet Gareth and left my aether shields low this time to serve as tripping hazards for Gimble and Sammie. Fighting Elijah and Elora had helped me come up with a ton of tricks for the mostly invisible aether shields. Sammie tripped and blocked Gimble allowing me to engage Gareth for a brief few seconds. He won the exchange and forced me back.

It was a game of cat and mouse as I liberally used and recast my aether shields to keep from being attacked by multiple opponents. My luck ran out when Gareth figured out a flaw in my spell. If he destroyed the aether shield, I had a short cooldown before I could recast that shield. It was only about 3 seconds, but that was enough for three people to get to me.

I sat heavily after conceding the first engagement. Gimble said two on one from here on out. So we began to cycle which two people would attack whom and who got to sit out. Gimble was good with his advice and commands once he figured out my tricks. He was a good leader, and I could see Gareth learning from him as we continued. Maybe having Gareth on the team would be a good thing for him.

Three hours later, I sat down. I was a complete mess of dried blood, sweat, and dirt. I cast my *cleanliness* spell and healed my body. Gareth stood next to me, sucking on a water skin, “Admit it Stormy, you had fun. And when did you get so good?”

I smiled at him, “Yeah, that was fun. I have been taking some private lessons. Let’s just say I am used to getting an axe to my thigh and a staff to my back.” His eyes popped.

“You are practicing with Elijah and Elora and you didn’t invite me! I don’t know if we can be friends anymore Stormy.” Gareth joked as Gimble came and sat with us.

“Gareth,” I started with some mirth, “you practice with them every day!”

Gareth looked hurt, “But that is not the same as private lessons with your best friend!”

Gimble interrupted our back and forth, “Sammie is getting there. She is learning quickly, but I think I should take her shopping for some armor and gear.” I reached into my pocket and created a platinum and then produced it for Gimble. He looked at it and then at me with a blank face before pocketing it.

I stood and changed my shirt. It had a few holes in it. “Coming back to the barracks?” I asked Gareth. “We can make the only transport if we leave now. Gareth looked indecisive as he looked at Gimble and Sammie.

“Yeah,” Gareth moved to join me, “can I come and practice with them next 7th day? Is Aelyn coming?”

“Gareth it is your decision. Just remember, Gimble is in charge,” I left my dungeon team in the training room with Gareth trailing me.

As we left the adventurer’s hall Gareth started, “So if Sammie and I are the front liners, and Aelyn and Gimble are the scouts, who are going to be the support and ranged?” This is exactly what I didn’t want to get into with Gareth. Party composition and logistics. “I don’t think Lana and Remy are good to bring into a dungeon.”

Gareth kept talking and I finally got annoyed enough to answer, “I have a combat mage. She is strong for her age and Lana will eventually be more powerful than her. Remy has experience delving and will be the healing support. I don’t plan to do much other than harvest resources the first few months to allow the team to get accustomed to each other.”

“You said she? Do I know this combat mage? What does she look like?” Gareth’s focus was now on another woman in the dungeon team. I started to think allowing Gareth into the team was a mistake. What if he alienated every female member of the team? We stopped for some meat on a stick. It was expensive but worth it. It was some type of bird meat from the dungeon.

We had an hour before the skyship left so stopped at the warehouse again. Gareth stopped to study the succubus painting, probably burning the image into his mind. I went to the warehouse and checked on things there. It was full of furniture and crates. The guards at least intercepted me until two remembered me from a few weeks ago. I went to the pile of growing copper bars.

I started practicing my metal shaping ability. When one of the guards asked, I just said I had learned a new spell and was trying it out. I made 10-foot-long copper pipes the diameter of my thumb. I was probably making them too thick, but I didn’t know what was required. I made 12 of the copper pipes and then thought I should stop and pretend I was aether exhausted. I had barely used 50 units of aether in my estimation, but I didn’t know what these Miaden guards would report.

I found Gareth talking with my artist. They were having a lively conversation over some of his sketches. I could see why Gareth was involved. Three sketches were laid out. The Seraphin, with her wings spread behind her, wielding a sword against a demon. The other image was of a female vampire posing on a white horse with red eyes. The third image was a female Lamia watching over her children in a woodland scene. Gareth was trying to convince the artist, Tatem, to make the angel’s armor sexier when I started listening in. She was wearing a fitted steel cuirass breastplate and had armor covering most of her flesh.

“Gareth, the images are already approved as they are by Isla. It is time to go,” I was shaking my head at my friend. “Let’s go.” I walked away, and Gareth followed after a while.

“Stormy, you really should consider what your patrons would want to see in our restaurant. I could stare at that succubus for hours. If all the other images were just as enticing, this place would be packed every day!” Gareth tried to persuade me.

“Our restaurant?” I asked, referring to his description of the place.

“Yeah, I remember you saying you would buy me a restaurant one day. So I am assuming this is it,” his bright smile looked down on me with not an ounce of seriousness.

I tried to recall the conversation, “I think I remember the conversation. I believe I said I would buy myself a restaurant, and you could eat for free whenever you wanted.” He slapped me on the back and grinned. He remembered the words as I stated and was just checking to see if I had recalled the same.

“Glad you remember! So when do I get to look at the menu?” he teased me as we walked. I was laughing internally because since he had joined the dungeon team, he was already going to receive that benefit.

“Consider it done, my friend. But you still need to tip the waiters when you eat. The menu is a work in progress. I had tasked Isla with preparing details so I can start to hire cooks and waiters.” I said as we climbed on board our transport. I went to the railing while Gareth excused himself to talk with a young woman who appeared to be alone. Even though this transport was going to Hen’s Hollow, a lot of people used it from Solaris since it was slightly cheaper. Most of the passengers would walk the mile distance to Solaris just to save a few large coppers.

I looked at the warehouse as we lifted off. It was slowly transforming from an eyesore to something else entirely. I needed to start to start working on the enchantments for the apartments and the restaurant. I checked my aether and created two platinum coins in my dimensional closet. This left my aether core about 25% full. I needed to temper my nightly training this week so I could give Wynna some coins.

I checked on Gareth, and he was talking to the young woman now, and she was smiling and giggling at his attention. Gareth’s confidence and boldness had grown since winning the pre-academy tournament. He was larger than most men, and his youthful face made him attractive. I was over 6’1” in height, and Gareth was still half a head taller than me. I was glad he was on my side.

The ship landed in Hen’s Hollow, and the crowd moved down the road to Solaris while Gareth escorted his new acquaintance. Monty came bounding up the steps and bowled into me. Freya was a few steps behind him. She gave me a hug, “Why didn’t you ask me to go to Aegis city today? We barely spend any time together.”

I said incredulously, “I see you every day at breakfast and lunch!”

She whined, “That doesn’t count! I am serving and cleaning up!” I felt she was about to ask a favor of me for this ambush as she was trying to make me feel guilty. And it came with her next sentence, “Do you think Wynna and Ennet can do a reading on me?”

“You awakened? At eleven? That is amazing!” I said with excitement.

She kicked the dirt, “No, but they should be strong enough to read my core. I know most readers can not until a person awakens, but…”

“Did you ask them?” I stopped her pleading.

“They said they would do it after I awakened, but you could convince them to do it now.” She had her puppy dog eyes going, and Monty was licking my hand in support of Freya.

“What is the rush, Freya? Your business empire is doing well, and you are happy.” I asked her as I started to walk towards the barracks. She fell in step, and Monty obediently walked at her side.

She kicked the dirt, “If I know what my awakening will be, I can make plans. I don’t want you to get too far ahead,” she mumbled. It was sweet that she thought she was losing her brother and wanted to try and keep up.

“Don’t worry, Freya. I will always be here for you. How about I include you in my restaurant business?” I said with a smile.

“Could I be a cook? No, I could be your top waitress!” she shrieked.

“No. Something even better. You can be my intermediary for food supplies for the restaurant. I want to source as much as I can from the farmers around Hen’s Hollow. The Gaskill’s wanted to raise cows, and I need steaks to grind into hamburger meat.” Monty barked as meat was a trigger word for him. Freya looked serious.

“What is my cut?” She went all business-like, no longer my helpful sister.

“Five percent commission,” I said, thinking that was probably too much.

“Fifteen,” she countered without a second pause.

I grinned and said, “Maybe Gwen would be interested…”

Freya looked hurt, “Fine! Five percent, but I can bring home samples to test their quality.”

I chuckled at her efforts to scam her brother. If the restaurant did well, I assumed we would be buying 20 to 25 gold worth of products from Hen’s Hollow every month. That meant over a gold worth of income for Freya. “I will get you a list, Freya, and you can negotiate with the farmers. And you should talk with father about shipping procedures from Hen’s Hollow to Aegis city.” Of course, she wanted to get started immediately.

We went to a classroom, and I used one of the chalkboards to put up estimates. I decided to stay on the low end. The list wasn’t too long as the 23 menu items were just going to be various burgers and chicken sandwiches. In order for Freya to bargain in good faith with the farmers, I gave her 20 gold coins and one large gold coin. The large gold was for the Gaskills to purchase a few cows and the permits to get started. Due to limited open space on the islands, raising large livestock was regulated. With the dungeon harvests, large livestock was not really needed, which I assumed was a reason for tighter regulations.

Freya had wide eyes at the large gold, but the regular-sized gold coins hadn’t fazed her. I spent twenty minutes talking to her about my own experiences in flashing wealth around. She at least seemed to take me seriously. Freya left with a spring in her step, and Monty circled her excitedly, feeding off her enthusiasm.

I wasn’t surprised Gareth wasn’t in our room. I set up the privacy bubble and my alarms. I started working on imprinting my new spell, *lessor restoration*. The spell was fairly powerful but only worked on a region of a person’s body and drew on the caster’s aether till the damage was repaired. It restored the damage to the state it was in one day prior to the casting. So it was useless in healing someone who was injured over a day ago. It was definitely a combat-healing spell. It still required contact with an individual to work, and you needed to utilize an evolution to cast on someone other than yourself.

Before going to sleep, I made three platinum coins, draining my aether stores.

When I woke, it was my alarm alerting me Gareth was returning. I dropped my privacy, and my friend said he spent the night at his parent’s house after having dinner with them. I also learned his new acquaintance from the skyship was a seamstress. She went to Aegis city to get lessons from a master tailor. I asked him how this fit into his relationship with the twins. He said they were still sort of mad at him but didn’t elaborate on why.

Conditioning was actually fun this morning with Aelyn. We played a game similar to soccer, but the goal was smaller, and there was no goalie. It was also just 6 on 6. Gareth’s team won and was rewarded with tomorrow off from conditioning. I knew Gareth would still do it, but his teammates would take advantage. If I had known about the reward prior, I would have tried harder. Mia and Fera had been on my team, and neither was happy with Gareth’s team winning.

At breakfast, Callem spoke to everyone. We had two weeks remaining of classes. During that time, the instructors would administer practicals to the students in their class. We also needed to select our courses for the next semester. It would be our second semester of three. I already knew what courses I was taking.

I would be taking an enchanting/artificing course with Instructor Aethon during the first classroom period. Instead of weapons training, I would have one-on-one spellcraft with Selina after lunch. During the afternoon classroom session, it was going to be regular spellcraft instruction with other students. Then we all had the required Skyholme history and law after dinner meal.

I had also promised to continue with my staff training in my spare time. I figured this could be my time out at Twin Rocks rather than eat into my personal time. I was looking forward to finishing these two weeks because we had an entire week off right after, and that coincided with when my building would be mostly finished. I was excited to get my adventuring team going and start collecting material for building my skyship.