**Chapter 48 (Arc 2 Chapter 2)**

**Aelyn came down the corridor banging a drum to wake us up. It had a high pitch bass that was annoying enough to get us moving. She yelled, “15 minutes to get dressed and outside on the grounds boys and girls!” She sounded way too happy to be getting ready to administer training to us.**

**I looked at Gareth who had my pillow over his head. Well, I did throw it at him last night so he could keep it. I pulled another pillow from my storage. Gareth asked, “Are we going to be on time or be late Stormy? I think it would be funny to agitate Aelyn a bit.”**

**“No Gareth, we are going to be on time. If not I am sure she has punishment lined up for us. Maybe extra hard training doesn’t faze you but I want this to be as easy as possible,” I replied rolling out of bed and stripping down. I had just pulled my clothes out of my dimensional storage when Mera came into the room. I was bare-chested and wearing cotton boxers.**

**“Oh my…I wanted to make sure you were up…sorry Storm. I didn’t…” Instead of leaving she just continued to stare at me as I returned her gaze as pulled up my workout pants.**

**“Is there anything else?” I asked while sitting down and putting on my socks.**

**“No, no.” She flushed bright red. “I’m sorry at home we typically don’t knock and I thought you were still sleeping.” My eyebrow arched and she retreated.**

**“Damn Stormy. You shouldn’t tease her like that. Give her an eyeful and then act all calm and collected. And now she won’t come barging in here again…who was that, Mera or Fera?” Gareth whispered the last.**

**For the twins, I had somehow instinctively triggered my assessment ability when I saw them so I knew. “It was Mera.”**

**“Damn it Storme!” He said a little louder. “I am sure Fera was just a step behind her and you scared them off.”**

**“Well, you heard her. They are used to people just barging into bedrooms at home Gareth. So feel free to do it to them,” I said sarcastically. Gareth really seemed to be thinking on my words as I finished dressing and he was just starting.**

**In the practice yard, our motley crew of teenagers was assembling. Gareth was on time, barely. Aelyn started speaking even though we were missing a few stragglers, “So welcome to basic conditioning. The core of your training is going to revolve around three different obstacle courses and two different runs. You will be doing all five every day and will be timed. If you are faster on all of them from the day before then your condition for the day will be done!” This got a number of people excited. “If you are not then you have to do 100 hundred burpees before breakfast!” They all looked around confused and I face palmed. I had shown Callem burpees on the farm and he incorporated them into our workout.**

**“Normally we would start with stretching but Callem wants to teach you himself during the combat session. So let me show the first run!” Aelyn began jogging and I followed her…then a string of uncertain teens did likewise. The first run was the short run, just 1.5 miles. The long run was next and was right at 5 miles. Many of my fellows were struggling mightily.**

**Aelyn then demonstrated the three obstacle courses. Highlighting her agility and speed. Gareth leaned over and whispered to me, “I hope I get to race on these new courses.” I sighed.**

**We all got through the first course before Callem came out to the yard and said morning conditioning was complete. Aelyn had used the entire 2 hours of her time and didn’t look happy that we didn’t try all three obstacle courses. I was happy to not be playing American Ninja on our first day.**

**A bunch of very tired and dirty teens made their way to breakfast. My brother, Pascal, was all animated as he had done pretty well. Gareth had dominated. I held back to finish in the middle of the pack. I knew if I set my base time too high then beating it every day would be more difficult. I noticed Mia walking beside me as we headed to eat. She appeared like she wanted to talk but held back. The twins finished near the bottom and looked miserable. They were strong but lacked aerobic fitness.**

**In the dining hall, Callem was already seated at the large table. Aldon was to his right. The three instructors we didn’t meet were to his left. Aelyn sat next to Aldon. Once everyone was seated Callem stood.**

**“Great job on the conditioning this morning. In the future, you may want to get up early and stretch. If you sustained any injuries you can see our resident healer, Storme Hardlight.” I was a little shocked by that announcement but calmed quickly. It was actually a great thing Callem was doing for me. The more practice I had with the spell the faster it would level. It took minimal aether to cast too.**

**“Our other three instructors have arrived. This is Selina, she will be spellcraft and herbalism.” The woman appeared middle-aged, with rich dark brown hair. I knew she was at least 200 years old so she was aging well. She had a smile on her face as she scanned the room. Her eyes kept coming back to me though. “Selina is an accomplished mage and researcher.” I knew this was in fact Sana Velin in disguise. She was an archmage. She had signed my copy of the cleanliness spell as an Instructor of the Tertiary Codex. So maybe I would be able to find out what that was.**

**She stood and bowed to us and then spoke in a soft voice, “Thank you for welcoming to your town. I hope to educate those of you with aetheric cores to cast your magic efficiently.” And that was it. She sat down and was quiet. Callem appeared to have expected her to say more too but she didn’t and he pressed on.**

**“Sitting next to Selina is Elijah Habriel, the famed monster hunter.” A few students gasped and Gareth elbowed me. “He will be teaching monster hunting.” The man looked to be in his late 50s with mostly white hair. He had a stubbly beard and was eating an apple and was not at all focused. I did catch his eyes briefly and he had the look of a man who had seen things that shouldn’t have been seen. He didn’t even stand to introduce himself and just munched on his apple. Callem looked a little perturbed but continued.**

**“Finally we have Elora Cassior.” The woman he indicated was tall even sitting. Callem had said she was a master of the staff. “Elora will be teaching reading/writing and dungeon delving.” Gareth elbowed me again. He was excited to get actual classes in dungeons and killing monsters. The woman was well-groomed and looked to be in her late 30s. But if she was a good dugeon-delver then she might have consumed some elixers to extend her life. She stood and spoke clearly.**

**“Thank you Callem for offering me this opportunity. I saw much potential today when you were under young Aelyn’s direction. I hope to bring that out in each one of you.” She smiled brightly and sat. She had this motherly quality about her. It was like she genuinely wanted us to succeed.**

**Callem nodded in thanks to Elora. “Aldon who was at dinner last night will be teaching math and artificing. If you wish to take the artificing course you need to speak to him personally. Now we will eat and right after you will select your classes!” Callem looked to be 20 years younger. He was made for this. Hopefully, after we finished our first year of the academy he would continue as the administrator.**

**The food was brought out by the local woman…and Freya! I shouldn’t have been shocked to see her with her beaming smile. She had probably wrangled to get a few coins to come and help. She bee-lined with her tray of food for our table. “Good morning Storme,” she said with glee. “Here is your food and I will fetch the pitchers of cold water for you.” I messed her hair up as she passed by. I wondered where Monty was…I guessed he was in the kitchen getting meat scraps. It was good to be able to see my younger sister every day. Unfortunately, she was not allowed to eat with us. She had to serve, clear, and do dishes.**

**When the breakfast was complete each of the instructors sat at a table to register for classes. A lot of the group didn’t have any choice as they were deemed insufficient in reading/writing, math, or history. I made my way to Aldon’s table and he smiled as I approached. “Storme! My niece Leda told me quite a bit about you! I look forward to teaching you the basics of enchanting and artificing!”**

**He seemed like a nice teacher and we talked for a good 10 minutes before Mia came up behind me. “Master Aldon,” she started, “As we discussed last night I would like to partake in your class.” She produced some neatly folded wire figures and handed them to him. He inspected them for a very long time before nodding. He must have given her a test last night to join the class.**

**“Your manual dexterity is good as is your projection of shapes. You can take my class.” Mia look relieved and then smiled weakly at me. Did she have a crush on me or something? She was a year older than Mera and had a fit body that was rough around the edges. Not unattractive but not beautiful either. I smiled back at her and went to Selina’s table next to register for spellcraft.**

**The woman had clearly been waiting for me. “Storme it is a pleasure to meet you. Callem has spun quite the tale to get me here.” I looked around worried that someone might overhear but there was silence. “Just a version of the *privacy* spell Storme. It has a huge myriad of uses. So it looks like there will be six of you in class. The blonde twins, Aelyn, Byron, and Gemma. Aelyn was going to be in my spellcraft class. That was great. She needed something better than the books I let her borrow and my poor instruction.**

**Byron and Gemma were cousins. Byron's parents ran the flour mill and Gemma’s parents ran the bakery. The greater family was responsible for processing most of the wheat and corn that grew around town and making ale, flour, and bread. The extended family was very respected. I thought the bread and ale they produced were very average but would never voice it.**

**It took almost an hour for everyone to choose courses and then we went to our first class. Mine was spellcraft. Selina introduced herself and pulled out six text on aether core utilization. She said before we could proceed everyone would need to learn all 23 aether core exercises. So we spent the next two hours going over each exercise. I had somewhat mastered them so it was boring for me but I helped the twins. Both twins picked things up quickly. Aelyn helped Byron and Gemma. Selina helped everyone and everyone showed me some new approaches to the exercises.**

**I was surprised that Selina was here being such a famous mage. What had Callem told her about me to get her here. Hopefully, I would find out eventually. I was definitely going to learn a lot from her over the next year. She was patient and extremely knowledgeable. I was really hoping she was going to give me a lot of help with spell imprinting.**

**A bell sounded and that meant we were off to lunch. Lunch was a lighter meal than breakfast with a variety of soups and slices of bread. We had weapons training after lunch so it made sense. I guessed dinner would be a large feast to replenish our calories. Once again Freya served. She was cutting bread and cheese and I complimented her on what a fantastic job she was doing. A short bark from the kitchens confirmed Monty was indeed getting fed in there.**

**We made out way to the yard after lunch and I was liking not having to do dishes or cook. I could definitely get used to this life! Callem got everyone aligned and ran us through the stretching routine. The other instructors wandered among us making corrections. When the stretching finished Callem spoke, “You will be training with two weapons of your choice. One weapon will be your primary weapon and the other your backup. You will spend four days a week on your primary and two days a week with your secondary. You can register your selected weapons with Aldon. He will not be teaching during this period. Selina had volunteered to teach daggers and short blades if anyone is interested. She may not be a master but she is quite proficient and will not lead you wrong.**

**I was definitely choosing the staff as my primary weapon. It would give me proficiency with a spear as well. So for my second weapon, I was deciding between the saber and bow. I was good with both weapons and having a long ranged weapon would be useful. But then again I would eventually have spells capable of long-range defense and attack. So saber it was.**

**Callem was very excited that I choose the saber as he would be able to continue in my sword instruction. For the staff, I was going to be taught by Elora. Mera, Fera, and three other classmates had also chosen the staff as their primary weapon. It was a good choice as it was a versatile and cheap weapon. Gareth had chosen the broad sword and hand axe at Callem’s suggestion. Elijah was a very talented fighter and Callem thought Gareth could learn quite a bit from him.**

**When we broke into our groups I once again worked with the twins. It was fun and they obviously had a lot of respect for what I was saying. With six classmates in the group, we got to rotating partners and Elora worked with each group. Most of what we were learning was footwork and staff forms. I knew them all already but Elora made sure to show me what a true master was. We sparred in front of the group near the end and her speed was so ridiculous. I didn’t even see the staff as it struck me multiple times. She was able to temper the power of the strikes too. She later apologized. She said Callem said it was ok to go a little harder on me since I had my healing spell.**

**When the lesson finished Callem brought everyone together and congratulated them. Everyone was to see me for healing before heading to the baths. This meant my staff training group got healed first and was racing off to the bathhouse in town. Just about everyone had some sort of injury so my spell was getting a great workout. It took about 20 minutes to get through to everyone.**

**I used my *cleanliness* spell and Callem approached me with Selina. “Storme this is archmage Sana Velin.” I nodded as he had already told me.**

**Sana spoke next, “Always call me Selina. It was my husband’s nickname for me and I don’t want my descendants to know I am back in Skyholme. You did brilliantly in the spellcraft class Storme. Callem said you had multiple spell affinities and an enlarged aether core.” I nodded.**

**Callem spoke next, “Last time Selina snuck back to Skyholme we became friends…well Selina has a wealth of knowledge she can share with you and I think you should spend time with her on your day off. I know you have the Annuals tourney this first week but after?” He asked the question and I nodded enthusiastically. Finally, someone to fill in all the holes in my knowledge. I thought I had done exceptionally well on my own to date.**

**“Fantastic Storme! I have two spells here”, she pulled two books from her waist pouch. It must had been a dimensional storage device. Those were extremely expensive. “You already have a copy of my cleanliness spell. These are the other two tier-one utility spells I teach all my apprentices. Master these three spells and their varied evolutions and you will be better prepared to tackle any spell in the future.” She smiled as I took the spell books. *Protecting Oneself from Prying Ears and Eyes, The Comprehensive Handbook for the Privacy Spell* by Sana Velin. *Introduction to Wards and Glyphs, The All Around Guide to the Arcane Lock Spell.***

**“I didn’t write the second but it is by far one of the most useful spells you can learn. The evolutions of the spell are so versatile! I look forward to working with you on the spells but for now, I know you want to focus on the upcoming Annuals,” she smiled happily and I could see the age and wisdom in her eyes. I had just received two basic spells for free from one of the most renowned mages in Skyholme history. If I had a choice I would drop out of the tournament in a second and focus on my spellcraft. But of course, I had too many people counting on me so I had to follow through.**

**I talked with Selina alone and reviewed the obstacles I was facing in my spell imprinting and she offered some suggestions. Her real knowledge was in creating a framework for spell evolutions. Over the next year, she would teach me everything she knew in this aspect of spellcraft.**

**The students trickled back from the baths with the twins returning first. Gareth raced back and found me. He had caught a peek at all the girls in the baths and said I should join the group next time. My response was a wisp of vanilla in his face.**

**My artificing class with Mia and Aldon Aethon was next. He gave each of us two text books. We were starting with the basics. Learning materials and basics of prepping materials for enchanting. I was going to kiss Callem for bringing in Aldon. I had made so many mistakes in my foray into enchanting with the ice cream bucket. Just from this three-hour session, I was extremely confident I could make a far superior device. Mia for her part looked quite lost and I think she was only taking this class because I was in it. Unfortunately, Aldon didn’t plan to have us do any enchanting for a few weeks. Foundations he kept saying…you need to build on foundations! I didn’t mind because I found it enchanting and fascinating. Maybe after a year, I could build my own skyship!**

**As classes ended we went to the dining hall to find a massive spread of food. I was amazed at how much they had prepared. It was going fast too. I went to the buffet table and loaded my plate and sat down. I was quickly joined by Mia. I waited for her to speak. She didn’t have time as a boisterous Gareth sat down with the twins shortly after. All three had been in the dungeon delving class and were excited about the conversation. I half-tuned them out…maybe I should learn the *privacy* spell sooner rather than later.**

**Mia was surprisingly quiet the entire meal. I wanted to talk with her privately to find out why she was hung up on me. Callem called everyone's attention to the instructor's table. For the next forty-five minutes, he read through Skyholme law. Now we needed to pass a simple written exam at the end of the school year. Just 50 questions that needed to be answered in paragraph form. Our town needed 80% of the students to pass to get funding for their academy next year. So we made an effort to pay attention. Elora kept it interesting as she had examples, usually humorus in relation to the laws that Callem was reading.**

**Finally, the pain of listening to the law was over and we were released! Seven hours and half hours was all we had till this started all over again! In my room, I lay on my bed and Mera sat at the foot of it while Fera and Gareth were on his bed. I paid attention to the conversation briefly. Gareth was advising the girls how to use their staff against various monsters he learned about in his morning class. Even though the twins tried to talk about their spellcraft class Gareth muscled the conversation to weapons over and over. I think he was a little jealous that they would have magic and he wouldn’t.**

**I tried to multi task. Studying portions of my lightning reflexes spell while participating in the conversation but it was a failure. I think the twins thought I was ignoring them but I needed to make progress. We ended up getting just a few hours of sleep and groggily was awoke again by Aelyn.**

**There was some good news at breakfast. Apparently, Elora had pressured Callem into shortening everything by 15 minutes except the one-hour bathing period. This meant we would get back 2 hours in the evening. We were not soldiers I had heard her telling Callem when everyone was bathing.**

**The week flew by and it was my best week for magic in a very long time. My cleanliness spell hit level 11! I cleaned the twin's clothes every night when I did a loop of their room. My evolution at level 11 was to increase the range away from my body from 18” to 36”. This made cleaning areas much quicker. It also meant I was just two evolutions from being about to clean another person. Maybe Gareth would get his wish.**

**My mend flesh spell hit level 8. At level 7 I selected the option to correct poor healing. This was a more advanced form of the remove scar evolution. Injuries that healed improperly could now be corrected. I was still just limited to soft tissue and couldn’t affect bone but that was fine. I had another spell that could repair bone…when I got around to imprinting it. The best part of my new evolution is it took a lot of aether. This meant I could use it to advance the spell faster if I could practice this aspect. I would be a good samaritan to use this spell on anyone who needed it in town.**

**The dimensional closet hit level 8 as well. Instead of making coins at night I just pulled shelves in and out of the space over and over. By my rough math and guesses, I thought the space would be about 16’ in height, 19’ in-depth, and 19’ in width if I didn’t add any more increases to its dimension. I would have to wait until my aether core matured to be sure but I was going to evolve a different aspect of the space at level 11.**

**I didn’t work on my alarm spell other than cast it on the barracks entrance every night. That would allow Gareth and I to be silently altered when Aelyn got here in the morning and could prepare for her banging by covering our ears. And yes I reclaimed my pillow after cleaning it with my spell.**

**Callem did make an effort to work with Gareth and me to help prepare for the Annuals. 32 would be reduced to eight after the trip to the capital. Our classmates were so excited and all the instructors were coming as chaperones. They were going to have a chance to go shopping and we were not since we were in the tournament. I didn’t think that was fair especially when Callem asked for me to make two large gold to pay for everyone’s admittance to the stadium for the event.**

**Pascal and his crew, as well as everyone else, were extremely supportive of us though. There was not a lot of jealousy going around. I learned Gareth’s odds of winning the whole tourney was 9 to 1, the sixth-best odds of all 32 competitors. I gave Callem a platinum to bet on him. He agreed to do it. My odds were 144 to 1. And I was not going to bet on myself. If I could bow out gracefully somehow I would.**

**When the day came we all went to the skyship docked next to the barracks. Half the town was squeezing on board. It was going to be an epic event in the history of Hen’s Hollow. I also made sure to store away a half dozen staves for the occasion. As we lifted off from the port I watched the land fade away beneath us enthralled with the feeling. I didn’t see Mia standing next to me.**

**We were alone and she said, “Storme can I ask a favor of you?”**

**I looked at her and she looked extremely serious. Over the week in enchanting class, I got to know her and she seemed normal enough. A good fighter with short blades in the yard and more fit than almost everyone else not named Gareth or Storme. I said, “I will hear your request but make no promises.”**

**She took a deep breath, “Can I join your dungeon delving team?” God damn it Gareth!!! Stop spreading rumors!!!**