Chapter 100 Arc 3 Chapter 4

Aelyn’s breath caught in her throat as she looked upon her mother in the cell.  Her mother’s vacant stare made Aelyn’s heartache. She knew it was a possibility—dead, brutalized, or soulless.  She tried to open the door, and when it didn’t budge, she screamed in frustration.  She had found her, and now just a door separated them.  She lost a few moments of thought as she fought violently with the door.  Aelyn calmed because Storme would figure this out.  Storme was muttering something about the door being resistant to his metal shaping.  He stepped back and began to fire beams of lightning at the wooden door, burning around the locking plate.  She waited anxiously.

To her, Storme was not normal.  Although he was young, he saw the world as an adult, except when it came to women. When it came to women, he was a child, oblivious to the obvious.  That was also part of his charm—his ignorance or reluctance to engage intimately with a woman.  There were so many layers to him.  She had only read his thoughts once when they first met.  His mind was complex and focused on learning magic, and that was it, unlike his friend Gareth who was constantly thinking about women and glory.  Besides his lecherous mind, she admitted Gareth was a good person.

Storm pulled the handle away with a gloved hand, and Aelyn flung the burning door open, but Storme held her back.  Storme doused the flames his repeated use of the spell had created.  Storme had so many secrets, and she thought she knew them all now.  His endless aether was not even his largest secret.  It was his ability to create and shape metal.  Actually, create metal and not just iron like some mages could do in the lowlands.  He could create silver, gold, and platinum as well!  That seemed ridiculous; he was a coin factory.  She had heard of mages being able to make false gold that turned to dust after a few days, but Storme’s coins were real.

Aelym rushed forward as soon as the flames were controlled and reached her mother.  She was catatonic, and no spark of life was in her eyes.  Aelyn started crying into her mother’s frail body.  “Aelyn, let’s get her out of the cell.  I can not check while she is in here,”  Storme revealed. Once outside the cell, Storme examined Niserie’s bracers and focused.  One fell to the floor, and then the other.  Those could not have been aether restraints? How could Storme remove them so easily without the corresponding key?

Her mother squeezed her in a soft hug, bringing her attention to her.  Her eyes were clearing, and Aelyn could feel her mother’s ability to enthrall people coming alive again.  It was just a minor ability that made people naturally like her.  Storme used his healing on her, but it appeared much of the damage was mental and not physical.

Storme led them as they sought an exit. When they reached the dead Wolfguard who defended the prison, Storme said,  “Aelyn, put those robes on your mother and cover her ears.  We might be able to get out of the Citadel.  Maybe Broderick will shelter her at the Gentle Tauren.”

Storme had a goal in mind. Niserie whispered to her, “Can we trust the boy? He does look familiar.”

Tears flowed freely now that her mother had spoken words, “Yes. He freed me from a lifelong indentured contract.” Aelyn’s voice was filled with admiration for Storme.

Niserie’s sunken face nodded slowly, but Aelyn knew that look. Her mother’s eyes were calculating something—weighing the truth of words and deciding on an action. She finally spoke, “So he will do everything he can to help us escape these accursed islands?”

Aelyn realized what her mother was doing. She was finding leverage for the situation. Niserie played people to her tune all the time. But never Aelyn. She had always been honest with her daughter and even taught her some of her skills. Skills she had used, at first, to seduce Storme. It had not worked and instead backfired, and he seduced her. Is that what her mother noticed in her few words?

“Yes, Storme will help us. He already freed you,” Aelyn whispered. She did not see her mother’s face, just a curt nod.

They entered a large chamber with seating surrounding it. The chamber they entered had a high ceiling with a bright violet light in the center.  Storm seemed to know where they were.  Neserie eyes locked to the purple light, “That is an aether stone.  What is it powering?”  She whispered.   She looked around, her eyes coming alive.  “A portal stone!  Aelyn, we can escape now!”

Neserie fell to her knees and traced the runes.  “These are portal runes.  We can escape to another portal. I know the pattern sequence for the city of,” she paused, “Llorth,”  She was tracing the lines in the floor and then spoke in frustration, “The patterns won’t link and are blocked and won’t activate.”

Storme spoke, “The stone in the ceiling prevents all teleportation.” Aelyn studied the crystal. A tier 7 crystal that size must be worth…more coins than she could imagine.

Aelyn turned to Storme, “Storme, can you cut it free?  Use your ability to cut the chains that power the blocking runes?”  Aelyn’s voice was pleading, and Niserie studied the interaction.  Aelyn continued, “Just cut the chains, and then my mother can portal away.”

Storme seemed to be focused and deciding on a course of action. He finally gave a curt nod and went to climb one of the silvery chains to reach the crystal. Niserie spoke softly to Aelyn, “Make him hurry. If we are found, they will not let us leave.”

Aelyn nodded to her mother. She did not want to tell her that she planned to stay—to stay with Storme. Aelyn shouted, “Can you do it, Storme? They could arrive at any time!”

Storme was struggling to remove the stone, but her prompting got him working faster. His foot swung into the open air, but she guessed he was using his magic as the stone finally moved. The stone just popped out and fell to the floor. Aelyn covered her eyes, thinking it was going to shatter. The stone just thudded and did not even bounce.

Her mother’s eyes focused on the stone, and walked over to it. Niserie struggled to lift the stone, either because it was heavy or because she had been greatly weakened during her imprisonment. Storme yelled down, “I will be down in a minute.”

Aelyn’s eyes saw the greed in her mother’s as she held the stone slightly larger than a person’s head. She hissed, “Compensation for my incarceration and treatment.” Niserie moved close to Aelyn and looked up as Storme was starting to make his way down.

Aelyn saw Niserie lock eyes with Storme, judging him. She looked at Storme as well and felt her mother’s hand on her shoulder. She felt the aether thickening in the room. Her eyes pleaded with her mother, but she knew it was too late. She met eyes with Storme again, trying to impart sorrow before they disappeared.

When they appeared in an open square with some people walking around, she spun to her mother, who had already secured the stone under her dress, holding it there like she was pregnant. Aelyn fumed, “I did not want to go!”

A few passersby stopped to see Aelyn scream at her mother. They were all elves with golden hair. She spun to her mother, “This is not Llorth!” Her mother had clearly said she knew the runes for Llorth. That is what Storme had heard.

Neserie nodded and smiled weakly from relief, “No, this is Cullinbar. I have allies here. When they questioned the boy, Llorth was just to throw them off the trail. The cities are in completely different directions. Now let’s go. Your brothers have never met you.”

Aelyn numbly walked the street. She had never visited the elven city of Cullibar. The sun elves that lived here were elitists and did not look favorably on half-elves, humans, or any other race for that matter. Surprisingly she only received quick glances. The sun elves were denoted by their light hair color, blonde, silver, and reddish pink. Almost everyone they passed conformed to this ideal.

Niserie seeing her daughter’s unrest tried to soothe her, “Not every race is as they are depicted. There is a lot of misinformation out there. The sun elves are cultural purists but do not sprun other races.” She shifted the stone under her garments. “As long as you do not disrupt the status quo, they will accept you.”

“What about half-breeds like me?” Aelyn pressed her mother.

Niserie was quiet for a long moment, “Yes. Unfortunately, that is one line the sun elves dislike crossing. Keep your ears hidden, or you may be asked to leave the city.”

Niserie knew where she was going, and Aelyn was finally able to pick out a few elves with darker hair and even a halfing and human or two. Aelyn asked, “Where are the skyship ports in the city?” Maybe Aelyn could get passage back to Skyholme and find Storme.

Niserie chuckled, “The sun elves mostly use the portal network. The closest thing they had to an armada are the Star Lancers. They would tear through the entire Skyholme fleet in minutes.”

Aelyn assumed they were some type of dragon. She asked, “What do my brothers do? You never talked about them much.”

Her mother missed a step, “Yes, it has been a few years. They were not happy with me when I brought you here as a baby. It was a difficult conversation.” Niserie seemed to almost reconsider but then increased her pace. “Travaran is a fletcher. He makes some of the strongest enchanted arrows in the city. Eroan teaches water magic at the university,” she said proudly.

The intricately fit paved stones changed to a new pattern under Aelyn’s feet. She recognized it as the elven symbol for crafters. The pattern kept repeating as they walked, and Aelyn briefly became transfixed with it. Neserie suddenly stopped in front of a shop with a sign showing two crossed arrows. There were no windows, and her mother inhaled deeply, let out a breath, and entered. Aelyn followed.

Natural light flooded the shop from the back, where large windows were situated. The store was relatively small, maybe 15 by 30 feet. Wall racks held individual arrows with small tags hanging off of them. Large barrels held hundreds of arrows. On closer inspection, each barrel held a different length of arrows.

An elf with silvery blonde hair came from a side room and paused on seeing them. Niserie smiled brightly, and the elf walked quickly forward to embrace. The aether crystal thudded to the floor. After a long hug the man backed away, “Mother, you look like you have been bathing in a black ooze. And smell like it too.” He looked over at Aelyn, “I assume this is her? I am your half-brother Travaran. Mother, the washroom is over there. There should be some of Esiyae’s clothes. Take what you need. I will explain it to her when she returns.”

Niserie left Aelyn and Travaran alone. He bent over and picked up the crystal, and placed it on the counter. He caressed it, and his eyes briefly went wide. He turned to Aelyn, “Aelyn? I think my memory holds. So what trouble has our mother gotten herself in with the Riders? Did she steal this for them?” he tapped the aether crystal.

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 “No.  Well, yes, she did steal it,”  Aelyn admitted.  “But she didn’t steal it for the Riders.”

He nodded and sighed, “I am ok with you.  Our brother is not.  His colleagues are not tolerant of half breeds,”  he winced as he said it.  “If some of my customers knew I had a half-sister, they might end their patronage.  That is why I argued for our mother to abandon you.  I have had time to think, and I do not care.  You are always welcome here, and my wife agrees.”  An awkward pause followed.

Her mother had not told her much of anything about her brothers other than where they lived. Aeylen finally said, “So you are a Fletcher?”

Tavaran grasped the conversation thread, “Yes. Fifty years now.  Just received a contract from the Star Lancer Riders five years ago.  More than doubled my sales.”  He walked to one of the wall racks, “These are my specialty—armor-piercing arrows. The enchantment can pierce armor and shields with ease. A Lancer Rider said a single arrow could take a large drake.” He took the arrow and handed it to Aelyn.

Aelyn examined the arrow. It was a black wood lined with silvery script—mithril. She looked at her brother, “Mithril?” He nodded.

Tavaran explained the arrow construction in depth. Each arrow took wood manipulation spells to align the grain and then fine work with a stylus to write the runes. The arrowhead was carefully manufactured to crush its aether crystals to charge the runes on the shaft on impact. “Strorme would have loved to see this and talk to you about your methods.”

“A friend of yours? Maybe a boyfriend?” Tarvaran asked, interpreting her reaction.

Aeyn winced, “No. Definitely not now. He made me this,” she drew and placed the rapier Storme had made her.

Tarvaran picked up the blade and ran his fingers along it, using spells to examine it. He sat down at a table and continued an in-depth examination. After a few minutes, he looked up at Aelyn, “He must have some pretty strong metal manipulation spells. The runes are embedded in the blade and do not compromise strength. The rune linkage is near perfect. It is almost a shame he didn’t use higher-grade aether stones and dust on such a magnificent creation.”

Niserie came in at this moment clean and wearing some loose-fitting clothes. She still looked thin and pale but now had some life in her. “Tarvaran, I wish to borrow some coin. The Crimson Riders will return it with interest.”

“No need to repay me. How much do you need?” He asked.

“Twelve hundred gold. That should be enough to get us to the moon,” Niserue replied calmly. Tarvaran winced at the amount. “Do not worry, they will repay you.”

Aelyn decided not to tell her mother that she had six platinum and nine large gold coins in various denominations in her dimensional storage. Storme had always handed her coin freely. He paid her the five platinum for joining the dungeon team one night and never asked for change.

Aelyn asked, “What moon?”

Niserie looked at her daughter seriously, “Aelyn I am bringing you with me to the Hand of the Crimson Moonriders. They control much of Esmeray, the dark moon. I think it is best if you spend a few decades training with them and join.”

Tarvaran started to move and Niserie stopped him with a gesture. Aelyn was angry and unleashed it on her mother, “The Riders? Do you want me to join the Riders? After they abandoned you!? Are you kidding? I didn’t tell you Gimble came and tried to rescue me. He failed. Storme rescued me, and then he rescued you!” Aelyn’s was beyond angry. Her mother had always let her make her own decisions and never chose a path for her.

“Aelyn, calm down. We can discuss it. With this,” she indicated the violet crystal, “You can get some of the best training in the Sphere. You will not even have to serve the Crimson Riders if you do not want to.”

Aelyn fumed as she sat. She was trying to think of a way of returning to Skyholme. After betraying Storme, would he even want her to return?

Niserie let her calm down before talking, “I was not on a task for the Riders. Otherwise, they would have rescued me. Gimble is a very old friend, and I am glad to hear he came for you.” A long pause as all three of them shifted in chairs. “Sleep on it, Aelyn,” Niserie finally said. “We can discuss it tomorrow.”

Tarvarav stood, “I will get your coin, mother. I will be back in the morning. My wife will be back tomorrow evening. Aelyn, if the crafter of your blade is ever in Cullinbar, I would love to talk with him and introduce him to our master crafters.”

Soon Aelyn was in a guest room. Niserie left to go out in the city. The guest room was also a library of sorts. She paged through the books on the shelves and pulled a map book of the three hundred years old region. Some regions had constantly changing borders, so these maps were mostly terrain maps noting cities. It took her a few minutes to find Skyholme, its rough orbit over the lowlands traced. She was far from the islands. She pulled a portal stone book and started cross-referencing the runic activations with specific portal stones.

Many races only allowed certain portal stones in their network. If you had a key sequence, you could override the protections, but Aelyn did not have any keys. Her mother had Cullinbar because she had grown up here. Aelyn traced a few possibilities and finally decided on a two-city hop. Each trip would cost her about 100 gold, but it was worth saving her time. It would take two years or more if she tried to reach Skyholme on foot. Traveling a skyship would save time, but the maps did not say the cities had skyships. Her best bet was the stone portals.

She packed some food from her brother’s kitchen and left him two large gold coins as compensation. As she made her way out, she paused at the faintly glowing aether crystal. It would take most of her dimensional storage to hold it. Maybe if she returned it to Storme, he would forgive her?

She emptied her space and stuffed everything into the backpack with the food. Then she pushed the aether crystal into her space and filled the space around it with coins, food, and whatever else she could squeeze in. Her mother was free to make her own decisions. Aelyn was going to make her own as well.