Chapter 90 (Arc 2 Chapter 44)

Loriel finally left, and I went down to the kitchens to get a meal.  I cooked it myself, which helped me think, and cooking was therapeutic.  I brought the food to my room, a massive basket of fries with sweet ketchup.  The two burgers were covered in candied bacon and caramelized onions.   I ate slowly while doing my aether and focus exercises.

I could hear Gareth’s room adjacent to mine, and he was having a get-together. A loud get-together. I pulled my enchanting books from my space and some aether crystals on impulse. An hour later, the wall was now a sound sink, and my room was completely quiet. I didn’t like the fact that I was in the dark about what the Bricios were doing. I didn’t care about the politics, but I still felt they would seek some kind of retribution for the role I had played.

My *alarm* spell went off, and the flash image showed Aelyn was at my door. I let her in, and we sat in the living room. She started, “Gimble is returning to the lowlands after the delve tomorrow. He said his services were no longer required now that I was freed.” I nodded, and Aelyn seemed uncertain about continuing.

“You can go with him,” I spoke softly, “If I were you, I would want to get away from these islands as soon as possible.”

Aelyn seemed to consider for a long time and finally asked, “Do you think there is anything between us.” She inhaled deeply, “A reason for me to stay.”

My mind turned to possibilities. Aelyn was exceptional, at least what she had shown me of herself. I thought she had been genuine, but maybe I should be more skeptical. She was waiting for an answer. I decided she would be safer, far away from me. “Aelyn, you should go with him,” I said and watched her face fall. “I want you to stay, but I want you to be safe. Skyholme is not a safe place, and being around me is not safe. I will be leaving Skyholme eventually. If you want to travel with me when I do leave, find me.”

That all sounded good coming out of my mouth. It sounded romantic, friendly, and protective all in one. She would appreciate my concern, and if she had feelings for me, she would wait in the lowlands for me. Aelyn’s crystal blue eyes clouded, “That is dragon shit, Storme!” She stood and kicked me hard in the shin, and I winced.

She looked just as surprised as me at her action but then yelled, “I will stay in Skyholme and leave with you, you dumb ogre!” The veins in her neck were raised as she raged. She flung a few more choice words at me, highlighting my stupidity. My shin was bleeding and hurt like hell, and all I could think was: Note to self, getting a woman angry that knows you can heal yourself is not a good idea. She finished her tirade with, “I am free to make my own decisions, and I have decided to stay!”

To emphasize her point, she flung a scroll at me and stormed out. I looked at the scroll, and it permitted her to reside in Aegis City as a dungeon delver. It was the same document that Gimble had needed when he arrived. I heard her descend the stairs to her room on the second floor. I wasn’t sure if I should follow her or let her cool off. I was just as bad at screwing up relationships as Gareth, apparently.

I went to Gimble’s room and told him I was returning to Hen’s Hollow, only to run the first floor tomorrow. I thanked him for his service and told him Ullmark would be in charge going forward. Thankfully Ullmark was in his room, and after a quick conversation, he agreed to take over a lead on the delves. I told Ullmark I would be returning to Hen’s Hollow tonight and would not return to Aegis City until my family relocated.

I was being a chicken. Aelyn couldn’t leave the Aegis City so I would not have to see her. I liked Aelyn but felt she was still clouded by her time indentured to me. Maybe some seperation would clear up our relationship. She knew some of my deepest secrets; now, she was free to espouse them without the mark. I trusted her not to do so.

I left the *Shiny Platinum* and went to the trade district but found few shops were open.  Aegis City didn’t match the upper trade district of the capital, with its stores always open.  I found an enchanter’s shop that was open and entered.  The smell of burnt wood assaulted my senses.  The proprietor was an older woman was graying blonde hair.  She asked, “How may I assist?”

I already knew this was not the vendor I wanted.  Maybe I could ask instructor Aldon to get what I wanted.  I tried anyway, “I am sorry, but I was looking for a paired communication stone set.  Tier three,” I told the woman.  She nodded.

“For tier three, your only option in Aegis would be Cullhorn’s.  He is closed currently, though, but he would open if I woke him,” she said without hesitation.

I immediately placed a gold coin on her counter, “I would appreciate that.  Is there a good place for aether and health restorative potions?”

“Cullhorn’s has some lesser potions.  Otherwise, you would have to wait till *Pyior Elixirs and Droughts* opens,” she added.

“Sounds good.  Where are we going?”  I confirmed.  The woman closed her shop, walked me two streets over, and banged on a door till a haggard old man answered.

“Damn it, Fystra!  If you have a customer, just knock regular like.  You know I *alarm* my front door!”  The man bellowed, and the woman just smiled.

“If I didn’t knock loudly, you would ignore me, Greyson,” she replied, and they both laughed at a private joke.  “Got a good one here for you.  Tier three communication stones and maybe some potions,” she said.  The old man looked me up and down and nodded.

“Ok, follow me,” he said, coming out in his sleepwear and walking a short distance to a store.  There was no sign on the door.

“I have never heard of Cullhorn’s before,” I asked, following him inside.  The woman, Fystra, had left to return to her shop.

“I am more of an acquisition specialist for delve teams these days.  Mostly retired.  I was an enchanter in the capital a few years back, working for the Miadens.  Now I just do custom orders and acquire some specialty items,” he answered.  As we entered, the shop had shelves filled with nick knacks. “Don’t touch anything.  Follow me.”

He went down an aisle, pulled a pair of golfball-sized black stones off a shelf in white oak box, and handed them to me.  He described the merchandise, “Demon bone horn, enchanted with tier three aether crystals and gold wire runes.  Two hundred and four gold. Should last two or three lifetimes.”  I touched the black bone spheres and felt the rune work embedded in them.  I nodded and pulled two platinum from my dimensional space with four gold coins.  The man inspected them briefly and nodded before pocketing the shiny coins.

“Not many people are looking for tier three stones anymore.  Delving a large dungeon?”  He asked as he moved to a different area of the shop.  Tier one stones had a range of about a mile.  Tier two had a range of ten miles, and tier three reached a hundred miles.

“Just want to make sure I can remain in contact with a friend as he travels the islands,” I said as I pushed the stones to my storage.  These stones were for myself and Bleiz.  I thought about getting another pair for Gareth and me but instead planned to enchant a matching stone and expand the network of these communication stones.  The man looked me over again for a moment before accepting my explanation with a short nod.

“I have just lesser aether restoration potions, and most are close to expiration,” he started searching through a rack of test tube-shaped vials. Found a bundle of six, “These six have about a month of shelf life left.  Maybe ten relative aether each, but I wouldn’t suggest using more than two in a day unless you want the runs,”  he chuckled.  “Two gold for the lot.  I have a rack not picked up by a delve team for healing potions.  They are over a month overdue to pay, so I will sell them to you.” He went to a rack of six potions. “Six gold for these.  They have about six months of life left in them and were brewed by Yarvin.”  My face was blank, so he added, “Yarvin is one of the better alchemists in the capital.  A friend of mine.  Well, do you need anything else?  You have been a good customer.”

“Do you sell spell books?  You said you were an enchanter.  Do you have any books on enchanting?  I dabble and would have made the communication stone myself, but I don’t have the runic patterns,” I asked hopefully.

“The runes are up here,” he tapped his head.  “I mostly worked on golems for the Miadens before they were outlawed.  The Inquisition destroyed my entire book collection.  I do have a few spell books. Mostly from barter with the adventuring teams. This way.”

I followed him around to the back of the store. He had a shelf with about one hundred spellbooks. This was more than a few. It was an impressive collection of mostly tier 1 and tier 2 spells. I guessed many awakened delvers sold their spellbooks after imprinting their spells. Cullhorn confirmed my suspicions.  I eagerly went through the spellbooks and started pulling a few out.

*Arcane Missle, Tier 2, Aether Sphere*

*Dimensional Box, Tier 2, Space Sphere*

*Privacy, Tier 1, Illusion Sphere*

*Mend Flesh, Tier 1, Healing Sphere*

*Arcane Lock, Tier 1, Aether Sphere*

*Wind Shield, Tier 2, Air Sphere*

The only rare spell in the bunch was the arcane missle. The remainder were common spells. Greyson looked through the books, “Ten gold for each of the tier one spells. Fifty gold for the *wind shield* and the dimensional spell. Two hundred for *arcane missle*. Three hundred and thirty if you want the lot.”

These were all for Bleiz. The *privacy* was a cheap move silently spell for him, and it would allow me not to loan out my own copy. Same with the *arcane lock* spell. The *dimensional box* would give him about a cubic yard of storage before any spell evolutions. Bleiz only had 11 slots for imprinting spells. If he utilized all these books and the cleanliness book that would amount to 9 slots filled. After the *cleanliness spell*, I would require him to learn the dimensional box spell next. After that, I would leave it up to him what spells he wished to imprint.

I paid Greyson for the spell books. And then asked for a tour of his shop. It was not really a shop, as he explained, he just made communication stones and worked with vendors in the capital as a middleman for three independent delve teams. I hadn’t studied the intricacies of delving like Gareth. But Greyson did convince me to purchase a camping kit. It was a heavy canvas four-person tent with a ground tarp, four bedrolls, and a full kitchen kit. Normally in the lowlands, you had to trek into some dungeon locations and camp. I didn’t know if I would ever need it, but I picked it up at 80 silver and with my dimensional space.

Most of his other items had to do with monster harvesting and non-magical first aid. I had my array of spells, so I was not interested. Grayson was old but fun to talk with, and he referred me to the other delve team he supplied. According to Grayson, they worked both dungeons in Aegis City and had decent character.

I left the shop and had to contract a skyship to take me to Hen’s Hollow. When I arrived, I went straight to the barracks to get some rest. I did not sleep well. I felt guilty about my strained relationship with Aelyn and worrying about the Bricios. My nightmare was Abaddon Bricio landing his Harbinger skyship in Hen’s Hollow and abducting Freya. I woke in a cold sweat.

It was early morning, and I planned to meet Bleiz out at Callem’s farm today. Gareth and the delve team would be heading to the dungeon right about now for the delve.

I lay in my bed and pulled out the two dungeon essences. One in each hand. I stared at both weighing my options and finally broke the seal on one and drained it. A warm feeling spread throughout my body, quickly becoming powerful abdominal pains. This was most definitely not the euphoric sensation that Gareth had described. My healing spells had no effect as I curled into a ball and moaned as my insides felt like they were being put through a grinder.

I couldn’t even move as my muscles contracted, forcing me into a ball. I began to think Pomare had tricked me, and whatever had been in the vial was not what the runic labeling had indicated. I retreated into my focus exercises to gain some control. At least now I could focus and watch as time passed. My time spell said I was incapacitated for almost an hour. Trapped in my own body before my clenched muscles relaxed. I immediately cast my healing spells, and eventually, I was able to sit up and lean against the bed on my floor.

I understood enough about aether and cores to understand something hadn’t gone right. It felt like I was trying to squeeze something into myself, and there just was not enough room. Could that be it? When I cheated on selecting my abilities, I maxed out my points. Had I reached my limit? It took time to feel out myself, but I identified the *exchange ability* in my core. I had successfully incorporated it, but it felt like I had eaten three Thanksgiving dinners in a row.

I looked at the other essence and pushed it into my dimensional space. I needed to consult an essence master, as Wynna had advised. I cast my *cleanliness* spell and still didn’t feel clean. A few more castings and I still felt wrong…no it was more like I was digesting the new ability. Getting acclimated to being stretched. I thought it best to hold off on trying the ability or casting spells until it settled.

I walked unevenly to Callem’s farm. It was close to midday now, and it took twice as long as normal to reach the farm. I walked into the main house and called, “Bleiz! Are you here?”

Bleiz appeared leaning against the kitchen counter, holding a large drumstick. “Thought you were delving today?” He took a large bite.

“No, they had enough members. I picked up a few things for you. And it looks like Wynna came through already,” I said. Bleiz was wearing some soft leather armor and black clothes underneath.

He smiled with his sharp teeth, “Yes. She dropped them off last night and asked what else I wanted. I had decided to forgo boots for now.”

“How did watching my family go?” I asked as I sat at the kitchen table because my energy was waning.

He frowned deeply, “You were right. That guardian beast is a hellion. He spotted me twice yesterday, even under the cover of the necklace. He even peed on my new clothes!” I started laughing and couldn’t stop for a good minute. Bleiz didn’t laugh but grinned at his own misfortune, which made me consider that he wasn’t an uptight assassin.

I pulled the spellbooks out of my dimensional space and it was with some effort. Like getting punched in my gut every time I materialized a book, “These are all for you. After you imprint the *cleanliness* spell you can learn the *dimensional box* spell. After that—you can decide what spells you want to learn.”

“Are you ok? You look pale,” Bleiz said, coming closer.

I was sweating again. “I will be fine. Just had a little too much of a good thing.” At least, I hoped I would be fine. I wouldn’t be able to function if I had to deal with this every time I pulled aether from my core.

Bleiz sat at the table and paged through the spell books. He started doing the math I in his head. “This would be nine places on my core,” he announced.

“Like I said, just the cleanliness spell and dimensional box spell. That is three units. After that, you can choose your own spells. If you don’t like this selection, just let me know what you want, and I will get it for you,” I said, feeling the color return to my face.

I had planned to spend some time training with Bleiz today, but that would not happen. Bleiz seemed to consider and then said, “The weapons you provided me are exceptional. Who enchanted the short swords?”

I grinned and bragged, “They were my own work. Do you like them?”

He nodded as he leaned back in his chair and suddenly looked out the window. I looked too but didn’t see anything. Bleiz replied, “A fox is in the fields. It caught a rabbit.” He turned his gaze to me, “Yes, they are just as good, if not better, than the ones the Blackguard captains carry. Do you want the longsword back?”

I had forgotten about the Baladon’s longsword. “Sure, I can store it for now.” He retrieved it, and I painfully put it into my space. “I think I am going fishing. Do you want to come along?”

Thirty minutes later, we were at Twin Rocks. Bleiz immediately noticed the heavy traffic and footprint patterns over here from Gareth, the instructors, and myself. He was eager to test them all, but I needed him to watch my family during the evenings. I pulled out the communication stone and my potions belt. “Here is a belt and some potions for aether and healing. This communication stone is linked to the one I will carry with me. If you need help or see something, call me.” Pulling things out of my space was getting easier, so maybe this *indigestion* was fading.

He rolled the black ball in his hands, studying it, and I felt the other ball twinge in my dimensional space. That was unexpected. I focused on the ball in my space and tried to use it. No joy on that. At least I could leave it in my dimensional space and be aware when someone was trying to reach me.

I pulled a chair out of my space—too soon for something this large. I almost vomited. I retrieved my fishing pole and sat, and began to fish. I only had one pole, so I showed Bleiz how to fish. We spent hours at Twin Rocks, and Bleiz even noticed a giant black eagle in the skies. I almost wished it had come down and attempted to attack us. Revenge would have been nice.

We parted as evening approached. Bleiz was going to change at the farmhouse before going on watch, and I headed back to the barracks. Gareth and the twins were not present, but Mia had returned. She informed me they were returning in the morning. She told me what I already knew, Aelyn couldn’t leave the city.

I made both of us dinner. Braised pork with a honey-ginger glaze. Mia was enjoying her duties, and when I told her we would be expanding the guards by fourfold, she got excited. I retired to my room, hoping a good night’s rest would alleviate my discomfort.