Chapter 68 (Arc 2 Chapter 22) Daddy’s Got a New Pair of Shoes

The week turned into a frenzy of worried students.  Conditioning became a week of light games and challenges.  The reason was the instructors didn’t want us tired mentally or physically for the real challenge.  We needed to pass certification for our primary and secondary weapons. We also had to demonstrate sufficient knowledge in our classroom studies.  That meant hanging with our instructor until they said we were done.

For my staff proficiency, Elora required that I didn’t use any spell craft for assistance.  This irked me but did show me how I had started to become reliant on my spells in combat.  There were dangers out in the Sphere where aether went wild, or aether sinks that could drain a mage’s aether in seconds.  The aether sinks were especially dangerous as they were almost always a dungeon establishing an entrance. This process could take a hundred years or more. I was surprised I had remembered that from all of Gareth’s ramblings at the meals about dungeons.

Fortunately, I managed to test out of the staff on my first attempt. But Elora ruined my joy by whispering to me, “See you tonight at Twin Rocks.”

Mera tested out as well, but Fera failed.  She had 11 more chances over the next 11 days of classes.  Elora mentioned that if she failed all 11 times, she would spend her break at the academy working on her skill.  I doubted she was going to fail. The instructors just wanted to ensure the students’ efforts met the expected standard.

My saber qualification was going against Callem.  Even before my first test, I knew I was going to fail.  The testing was too arbitrary. If I couldn’t use my spells, then I had no chance against Callem and just had to work hard enough that it was acceptable to him.  Well, that didn’t happen on the first day.  About 50% of the students failed with their primary weapon, and 80% failed with their secondary weapon.

Things didn’t let up there. In spellcraft, Selina had requirements for each person to pass. Most of the class still needed to imprint their first spell. I had to imprint my current spell, which I thought was completely unfair. I learned multiple spells during the term, including a tier 4 one. The good news for me was the *lesser restoration* spell was in the healing sphere, which I had a tier four affinity for. Two weeks was about the amount of time I would need to imprint the tier 3 spell.

Artificing class was more pleasant. Instructor Aethon just wanted me to complete four completed enchanted artifacts. I could do that in one class with my metal-shaping ability, but I would draw it out over the week. Mia only needed to finish one simple working device. Most of my time would be spent helping her as she was still having trouble with the exacting nature of the runes. You needed at least three runes for a working device, and they had to intersect at the correct points.

I had a chance to talk with Aldon about next semester. I wanted to work on all the common devices I would need to outfit my restaurant, bakery, and apartments in the city. I also wanted to start getting familiar with the runes for skyships. The heating runes for stoves and ovens were pretty simple, and I could just duplicate them from the books. The walk-in freezer, roof water condenser, and one-way viewing glass would need some work on my end. I was excited for the second term and hoped to get the ovens and stove tops enchanted on this seventh day.

After dinner, we had a written test for all the post-dinner lectures we had been given about Skyholme history and law. I had not listened too intently as my mind had wandered to more important things. If this test had been multiple choice, I probably could have done well, but it was not. When I got only 27 of the 50 questions correct, Gareth was quick to grab a sheet and announce to everyone in the dining hall that Storm Hardlight was not, in fact, perfect. I didn’t mind his display. It just irked me that he had passed the test by getting 45 of 50 correct.

Both the twins passed the test and said, “Storme, you can come to our room, and we can help you study every night till you pass.” This, in turn, irked Gareth. He was still mending his relationship with the twins. I thought this might be an opportunity for me to do the same as they had grown distant.

“I would love to get your tutoring, Mera and Fera,” I replied with a smile. I planned to sneak out to Twin Rocks right after and not return to my room. That way, Gareth would think I spent the entire evening in the twin’s room.

We studied on Mera’s bed with a twin to either side of me with the door closed. Reviewing Skyholme law and history was boring, but we covered every question I got wrong. We then switched to helping the twins with their spells. Both twins were working on the *privacy* spell. Late at night, I slipped out their window, explaining I was going to go get extra training with Elora and Elijah. They were totally on board with tricking Gareth into thinking I slept in their room, and Mera said if I wanted to, I could actually sleep in her bed with her when I was done.

My jog out to Twin Rocks had me thinking about next term and what enchanting work would be needed on the skyship. I had the manual to build a ship the same as the *Wind Splitter,* but I was already thinking of improvements in my head. I heard fighting ahead as I approached and rushed to help.

I was extremely disappointed to find Callem, Elora, Elijah, and Gareth engaged in combat. It looked like Elora, and Gareth was holding off the other two. Gareth yelled while blocking two quick strikes, “Stormy, we couldn’t wait for you any longer and got started!”

Gareth wore a grin the entire time as the round of combat finally concluded. They were all breathing heavily, and the intensity of the combat was no joke. Callem looked at me and smiled, “Hope it is ok, but Gareth asked to join us out here,” I nodded distractedly. “Storme, you can heal everyone, and we will get pairings for the next round. Since your saber skills are lacking, why don’t you just use that weapon for tonight.”

I healed everyone, and there were quite a few somewhat serious injuries. Well, if Gareth was going to spoil my secret training, then I was going to spoil his sense of superiority. The first pairing was Gareth, and I paired against Callem and Elijah.

The saber was a much more limited weapon for me. I had a shorter range and took longer to recover from strikes. I quickly fell to Callem, even after directing both my aether shields at him. I didn’t see how Gareth had fared, but he fell as well. I healed the painful injuries, and we went again and again and again. Every time it was Gareth and me paired against a pair of the masters. I wanted to oppose Gareth so I could surprise him with my *lightning reflexes* spell. It never happened.

Obviously, Callem had some type of plan in place. Gareth and my teamwork slowly improved, and we started communicating better. I started using my aether shields to protect him. We developed a short verbal code for when I used an aether shield to protect him, which had a great effect. In one match, I used both aether shields to protect Gareth’s flank from Elora allowing use to both attack Callem at the same time. Gareth got a killing blow.

After that, the gloves were off, and the masters beat us every time. Finally, I said, “I have had enough.” Gareth and the weapon masters were having a grand old time, but it had been over three hours, and I hadn’t had a break. Normally these sessions would be a 20-minute jog out here and two hours of training and instruction. This session was well past three hours, and they highlighted my inadequacies with the saber. “The saber is such an inferior weapon to the staff! I should be using a sword with a two-handed grip and a heavier blade. You are just beating my light weapon aside and forcing me on the defensive every engagement.” I sat down and healed my recent wounds.

Callem smiled, “About time you realized it. Elijah you win the bet. He thought you would figure it out the first day. I thought you would be stubborn and take at least three. Elora gave you a week because she thought you would just practice harder.”

Elora scoffed, “Yeah, and you were twice as hard as him as you needed to be. If you built the intensity slowly, he would have tried to adapt.”

Elijah added, “Real combat doesn’t give you a chance to adapt Elora. He needed to stop wasting time on that steel twig. He has grown at least two inches and put on 20 pounds of muscle this term. He needs a bigger weapon, and it was a decision he needed to make on his own.”

It was true. My body was filling out, and I was almost 6’2”, still five inches shorter than Gareth. Working with the heavy staves, my wrists were strong, and my forearms were well-muscled. Elijah added, “I would suggest the twohanded axe, but you have spent too much time learning the sword forms with a bladed weapon. You can’t switch to using a shield due to the somatic hand elements of your spells. So I suggest….” Callem had given him a look. I knew a dozen different sword types and had practiced sparingly with most.

The somatic element of the aether shield was just a simple gesture like tossing a small net with my off hand. So I couldn’t go with a sword so heavy it required me to always have two hands on it. Callem and everyone waited on my decision, and I disappointed them, “Thanks, I will think on it.” I cast my *cleanliness* spell and walked back toward the barracks.

I could hear Gareth asking for more sparing practice. Since he had gotten the *hasten dream* ability, he had lots of free time at night. He usually spent it reading and studying his books. I didn’t have that luxury and needed a good six hours of sleep. Today I would be lucky if I got five.

I had an idea of what kind of sword I would switch to. I wanted a two-handed slashing weapon as that was the familiar style with the forms I had learned. That meant a katana-style blade. The blade would be heavier than a typical katana and slightly longer to take advantage of my arm length and height. I would have to make some and test them out over the next few days.

At the barracks, I noticed the twins had left their window open for me. It was a nice gesture, but since Gareth had found me at Twin Rocks, I didn’t need to utilize the entrance. I set my alarms and privacy and passed out after dropping some platinum coins into my dimensional space.

At breakfast, Freya sat across from me. “So Storme, I have worked out seven supply contracts and gotten the Gaskills to start shipping two hundred pounds of beef and two hundred pounds of chicken breast meat every 3rd day. The third day is the cheapest transport day according to father. Your quotas for flour, eggs, and butter….” Freya’s organization and promptness in completing the task surprised me. She was trying to impress me, and I would say it had worked. She was definitely going to do great things. I had her focus on the bakery supplies. I would need to get the walk-in freezer enchanted before we could start receiving meat. I told Freya she was doing a remarkable job.

Mia, who had listened in to the conversation, asked, “You are starting a restaurant in Aegis city?”

“I am heading there on the 7th day. Do you want to come and check it out?” I asked, not looking at her and eating my cold omelet. Since I had spent most of the breakfast talking with Freya, I hadn’t eaten much of anything.

When I went to Aegis city on this 7th day, I hoped to hire some staff. Hopefully, Isla found me some candidates.

Mia was beaming as she said, “That would be great! I will get a skyship token.” Mia was gone before I could offer to pay for her.

During combat training, I remained working with my saber. Most students were working on their failed weapon certifications. Some were retaking it, and others were just practicing. It was more disorganized than normal as the instructors traveled among us and helped or tested where they could. I was planning to create some new weapons tonight, so I just focused on practicing the sword forms.

The rest of the day went well, but Freya checked in at lunch and dinner. She was meticulous in her planning and attention to detail. She confessed it was due to the responsibility of being given such a large sum of coin. She thought it was Callem’s coin and not mine. If that got her to do a better job, I wouldn’t dissuade her.

That night I made four different katana-like blades. I was sure mine were thicker and wider than a true katana. These were all blades for me to practice with at Twin Rocks to figure out which blade length was the best for me and to start to get accustomed to a two-handed style.

During classes and at Twin Rocks, Callem and the other masters were very patient with me. Callem helped me refine the best blade for me, and my techniques began to transition over. Usually I would spend two hours at Twin Rocks and leave Gareth with the masters. It was kind of a fun party for them, testing and improving their skills against each other. The only point I missed was leveling my *lightning reflexes* spell. That was fine, as I needed to make platinum coins anyway to finish the warehouse. I was still looking forward to my big reveal to Gareth.

Mera learned the privacy spell first. She had a very small amount of aether but eagerly cast the spell over and over to work on evolving it. Fera learned the spell two days later, and the twins were now both mages. I offered to bring them to Aegis city to celebrate, and they accepted. They were also going to see the converted warehouse as they had accepted my offer to work for me.

Callem informed me the dungeon crew of Lana, Talia, Remy, and Sammie would be coming to Hen’s Hollow from the sixth day to the seventh day to train with Selina, Elijah, and himself. That meant Aelyn and Gareth would be training with them as well. Gareth was excited when I told him and Aelyn…not so much.

On the fifth day I dropped off 36 platinum coins to Wynna while everyone else was at the bathhouse. Isla picked up 35 coins the next day from Wynna, keeping the guise that Callem and Wynna were financing the conversion of the warehouse.

I didn’t travel to Twin Rocks on the sixth night with Gareth. Instead, I was in the artificing classroom. I sealed the door and set up privacy curtains and alarm spells. I was going not only to make myself a new blade but also to enchant the blade. I started by creating tier 4 aether-infused mithril wire. I didn’t have a lot of mithril, just a small coin in size, but I was planning to embed the wire in the sword. I coated the thin mithril wire in gold. I had tried and failed to create adamantine, the best insulator, but I had no idea what it looked like to get a mental image. I would need a sample before I could try my hand at creating that ridiculously precious metal.

I was going to be ambitious in this project. I was going to attempt three simple runes with the powering tier five aether crystal in the hilt. With the sale of my light globes and ice cream makers, I could ask Instructor Aethon to bring me pretty much anything to experiment with. The tier 5 blue crystal was small but was still worth 500 gold. Since all three runes were connected to one crystal, they would all be active when activated. The three runes were hardness, sharpness, and anti-aether aura.

The last was just a countermeasure for someone casting magic against the blade. It meant I could not use my alarm flash-bang spell on the blade, but I was fine with that. The aura from the rune was not strong enough to cut fireballs in half but might disrupt tier 1 spells if the blade was brought in contact with them. It would drain the crystal in the hilt, but a tier 5 crystal had a large reservoir, and I could fill it as well.

I spent hours working on the blade and hilt. Since I was burying the runes inside the blade with my shape metal ability, the blade should appear normal. The blade was 29 inches (74 cm) in length, and the guard and handle were 10 inches (26 cm). Tier four aether dust was used as I folded the steel on itself. I couldn’t get tier 5 dust as the cost was prohibitive for the Aethon family to stock it. When the blade was finished, I etched the runes with the mithril wire coated in gold. I was making the runes extremely small, and it was slow work, even with my ability. When I finished, I ran the final threads of wire to the aether crystal embedded at the base of the handle. Then, with care, I pushed all the wire in unison into the blade.

I fixed the aether crystal in place and looked over my creation. The last bit would be to get Antal in town to use his bone-shaping ability to finish the handle and then balance the handle and blade. If I was correct in my estimations, I wouldn’t need to make any adjustments.

I marveled at my work. I had started with the idea of a katana, except it was slightly wider, and the blade’s curve was not as pronounced. The blade shape was probably closer to a falchion, albeit a two-handed falchion. I wrapped the handle tang in leather and practiced with it for a while in the sealed room. I could wield the 4.2 pounds (1.9 kg) weapon one-handed or two-handed. It would take some time to get used to a heavier blade as the saber had been just under 3 pounds (1.4 kg). I was too tempted not to try the runes and activated them and slashed a chair. The wood parted under the sharpness rune, and the blade lodged in the stone floor.

By using mithril in the runes, I could overcharge them and not risk damaging the integrity of the weapon. The overcharged sharpness rune of mithril was too powerful. I swore. I would only be able to use this blade in actual combat. After disposing of the damaged chair, I went and made breakfast for myself because I was famished. That magic forging session had taken me over seven hours, and I was hungry and tired. I started making raspberry pancakes because they were quick, and I could smother them in butter.

When I had over eight large pancakes, I left the dishes and went to find Antal in town. It was still early, but I woke him and his wife, “Master Antal,” I said when he came to the door.”

“Strome? Is someone injured? How can I help?” He said after recognizing me. I suddenly felt guilty for waking the man.

“No emergency. I just have a secret request. Can we go to your workshop?” He nodded and told his wife to go back to bed. I had an excellent reputation in town, and if I said something needed to be secret most people would oblige. I placed the wrapped blade on the table and a wyvern horn as well.

“Master Antal this blade was recently placed in my care.” I unwrapped it and let Antal assume it had been given to me by Callem. “I need the hilt completed with this wyvern horn. I came so you could match the grip to me.” Antal was handling the blade like it was a precious artifact. It took him some time to finish his inspection, but he did put it down.

“It is a beautiful blade. I have never seen a sword like it,” he started. I put a large gold coin on the table next to the blade.

“Unfortunately, you didn’t see this one either,” I said, and he nodded. It was fifteen minutes later of watching him work and fitting the grip to me. His ability was very slow working.

“I compacted the bone as much as I could, and the grip looks complete,” he said. I picked up the blade and went through some sword forms. It felt amazing. I put the unused portion of the wyvern horn into my dimensional space. Wyverns were not rare around Skyholme, but the horns were costly. This one had cost 20 gold and came from Aethon’s family shop in the capital. Antal had only used about 20%, so I could use it again in the future.

I thanked Antal and left. The new blade went to my dimensional space. It was early morning, and the skyship going to Aegis city was leaving in an hour. If we missed it, then we would have to catch one in Solaris. I thought it best to collect the twins and Mia.