**CHAPTER 40 Gift Exchange**

At breakfast the next day Callem confirmed we could head to Hen’s Hollow for the festival. We would be able to spend it with our families which had everyone’s excitement renewed after last night’s somber story. The end of year/start of new year festival was a huge event. Leda decided to head home to spend it with her family in the capital and Cilia was going to be going with her. They were going to use the transports in Hen’s Hollow as Sebastian was not coming to retrieve them.

The festival itself would be five days long all across Skyholme. The first day of the festival was a family event called the Day of Remembrance. This was a day when everyone remembered those who passed during the year and those who passed prior. Usually, the time was spent telling stories of those people being remembered. In the evening you exchanged gifts with friends and loved ones, kind of like Christmas. It was a substitute for not celebrating birthdays.

The second day of the festival was a celebration of the past year’s events and the town commons in Hen’s Hollow got extremely lively. It was a big social event with dances, food, alcohol, games, and plays.

The third day of the event celebrated the coming year and was a continuation of the previous day’s partying. There were usually large groups singing together in the streets, and lots of drinking also happened on the third day of the festival. Usually, some type of illusionary fireworks display happened in the darkest part of the evening. Well, our little town hired a mage for illusionary fireworks every year.

In the cities, they had actual fireworks to go with large illusions in the sky. The fourth day of the festival had a morning meal which was supposed to be spent with loved ones or someone you were courting. And that was the last event of the festival. The rest of the fourth day was ‘clean up’ and the fifth day was the day of recovery from partying so hard to get ready to return to work.

I was looking forward to the festival, seeing Freya and my family. The training today progressed slowly as we all anticipated Wynna’s return. We were not disappointed as a modest-sized transport skyship landed on the commons. It was not a beautiful ship like the Wind Splitter. It was a clunky, boxy thing but functional. It didn’t glide and move gracefully and was constantly making adjustments to its approach. There was an open upper deck and Wynna and Ennet were on it waving to us as it landed.

After the ship landed Wynna came and hugged Callem and then directed the unloading of the ship. Lots of furniture and crates came out of the hold. The shelves Wynna got me were beautiful. She said they had a hard white maple from a dungeon. They were molded by spell magic and had an organic look to them with some curves.

There were three shelves and they were all the same size. The wood was white with thin black growth lines, I thought zebra wood would have been a better description. The size was off though. The shelves were all nine feet long (2.75m), there were six shelves on each unit and the depth of them was 22 inches (0.55m), the top shelf was just over seven feet in height (2.1m). So unfortunately they would not all fit if one went on each of the three sides…unless I expanded the space.

A beautiful desk made of the same wood came next and it was large, 3’ x 6’ (.9m x 1.8m), and it was an office-style desk with drawers and everything. Not what I wanted. Then a chair came, it was a swivel rocker from the same wood and was padded with dark brown leather. Wynna came to stand next to me. “Sorry Storme, I couldn’t break up the set. There is a bed, armoire, two burrows, and two blanket chests too.” I watched as the men from the ship unloaded everything and brought it to the basement.

“Thank you Wynna. The wood and craftsmanship are beyond reproach,” I said. It wasn’t a lie. I went to the basement while everyone else was upstairs picking through their haul from Wynna. She had packed everyone’s requests in individual crates with their name on them. Well, I could jam all this furniture into my space. The bed at least was just the frame, it was not assembled and would be bigger than a king bed if I had a mattress and was put together. The wood was extremely dense as it was incredibly heavy. I would need help getting everything into my space. Fortunately, Callem came down the stairs.

“We have forty or so minutes before we need to head back up. Let's get everything into your storage space.” With that, I opened the space with a full 10’ x 10’ (3m x 3m) door and Callem helped me cram everything inside. We lined up the three shelves to the right. I really only needed access to one shelf currently. Everything else we packed and stacked, starting at the back of the space. The desk and chair were the last items put inside. When we finished I had just enough room to access one shelf and utilize the desk and chair. I still needed the casks of water and wine but I could wait on them. I closed the portal and smiled. Even though the space was a mess, it was more like a hoarder’s storage closet, I had made progress in my plans for the spell.

I went upstairs with Callem and found the skyship gone. It was headed to Hen’s Hollow to unload the rest of the cargo to Ennet’s house. There were stacks of things still in the practice yard. Callem clapped his hands and started directing us. We were going to be getting a workout. Gareth got the job of bringing my casks to the basement and I had to slide crates inside with Cilia. One crate was labeled with my name, I checked quickly and it was the gifts I had gotten everyone.

It took everyone a few hours to get everything where Wynna wanted it. The guest room was now packed with furniture and crates. Wynna was trying to convince Callem about expanding the house to include two more bedrooms. There was a lot of excitement in the bunkhouse as each of us had a crate with our names on it. I wondered what everyone had gotten me. I would find out tomorrow after dinner.

We ended up getting a short break before weapons training. Callem had us back on axes and throwing daggers today. We were supposed to wear them while in town during the festival for protection. After dinner, Wynna canceled the discussion so she could unpack. This gave me time to study. I also went to the basement and loaded my casks into my storage space on the shelves. I put down some old clothes to protect the shelves worried I might damage the beautiful wood but it was probably not necessary. The space looked like the beginnings of a hoarder’s closet.

Back in my loft, I reread some of the notes in the spell book for the dimensional closet. One particular note near the end of the book I read a few times pondering. It said a dimensional closet cast before an aether core fully matured would expand with the core.

I had not thought too much of the note as it said the space would only expand around 6% in volume if cast early after a core was awakened, within a year. This was not a huge increase but there was no mention if an aether core ability could affect that percentage. With my tier 4 aether core expansion would this affect the space?

It made me think that recasting the spell over and over to increase the level might be a bad thing as it would be resetting the space. Right now I could think of it as a seed in my aether space that could grow. With a tier 4 enhanced core would the percentage be 24%? Or if it held that each tier was three times as powerful as the last could the multiple be 81 times? That would mean a possible expansion of the space by 486%!

The note in the spellbook did mention it was a volume expansion, not linear. So that would be 1,000 square feet to start…going to at most 4,860 square feet. I got out a pencil and paper and did some math…that would make the new space about a 16.5 foot box. Well, I really hoped that would be the case. I could check on the shelves and see if they got further from the walls as my core matured to confirm my hypothesis.

I didn’t study too much before going to sleep. Everyone else was going through their crates in secret. I did think that I should be able to imprint the alarm spell shortly after the festival.

Breakfast in the morning was still lively with everyone teasing everyone about what they might have gotten them. The big reveal would be tomorrow night. The day after we would be heading to Hen’s Hollow. The banter continued through stretching. I was quiet and anticipating playing with my dimensional space.

For dinner, I prepared a simple marinade for chicken thighs, breasts, and wings. I would grill them tonight and cook some long-grain rice with diced vegetables to go with it. The preparation took me all of 30 minutes. That gave me about 90 minutes to play in the basement. I did start Wynna on some chocolate eclairs for dessert while she was getting lunch ready. She was a good baker but still not a great cook but she was making some progress.

In the basement, I opened the space and looked closely at the wall and shelf…about one finger width separated them…but was the shelf flush to the wall last night when we brought it in on this side of the space? I muscled the shelf against the wall after taking the casks off it. I doubled checked and it was flush now. I replaced the casks. I closed the doorway. Ok, I thought, it was time to practice the exchange ability fpr the spell.

I started with my dragon bone dice. They were lucky and I got some insights from them. When I had an item appear it was oriented as it was in the space. I learned this by studying the pips on the dice as I pulled them from my space a few times. This meant I would need to make sure any weapons would have their hilts oriented toward me when I stored them in the space.

Putting objects in the space was easier than I thought. I had a quick flash in my mind of the space and could place the object anywhere inside where it would fit. Apparently, gravity didn’t take hold until the doorway was opened. I did realize that I hadn’t needed Callem’s help yesterday to get everything inside.

Next, I tried removing one of the shelves from the space and found I needed to have an area available for the shelf to appear that had only air. The shelf displaced the air causing a small pop when it did appear due to its volume. This also drew some aether from my core which surprised me as the evolution did not say the ability required aether to use. The dice drew so little aether I hadn’t noticed apparently.

So the mass of the object exchanged with space affected how much aether was needed. In order to measure the aether I started moving the shelf back and forth. My best guess was it took 17 exchanges of the shelf to use up 1 unit of aether. The shelf unit weighed around 300 pounds (136 kg). So one aether could move 5,000 lbs (2300 kg). I then spent time rearranging the space with the exchange ability. I checked on the leveling progress of the spell… and yes it had moved to about 20% toward level 4. This was fantastic! I could level the spell by using the exchange ability.

I went upstairs and checked on Wynna. I helped her finish the eclairs. As I was filling the eclairs I thought, could I fill my aether space directly with the metal I created? Essentially making the metal within my dimensional space. It took a lot of focus on my part but I succeeded! I could now empty my aether core at night by making coins directly into my storage closet!

As was typical, my mind was churning over other thoughts during training. I found myself isolating myself from everyone and focusing on making gold coins on the shelves in my space one at a time. As the day progressed I found I had mastered the skill and could make the coins as easily into the space as outside of it.

At dinner, I grilled the chicken and cooked the rice and vegetables. It wasn’t my best effort, but everyone enjoyed it and the eclairs even more. I think the eclairs were Leda’s new favorite food and she had chocolate icing on her lips and cheeks. I got some free time while everyone cleaned up. I checked my crate to make sure all my gifts were there. Each was wrapped in a white cloth. I rearranged everything inside the crate for ease of access for tomorrow night.

Tonight’s discussion was led by Callem. The entire 90-minute session revolved around recognizing people who may be watching you. It was actually pretty interesting and we all asked questions as the session progressed. After the session, I immediately used my cleanliness spell and climbed into my loft. I was studying the alarm spell when Aelyn climbed into her bed.

“I don’t think I want to go into the town for the festivities,” she said. She obviously either wanted to ask me to ask ‘why’ or just wanted some attention.

“Aelyn are you worried about the brand?” I asked after a few minutes of thinking about it. She didn’t respond immediately.

I returned to studying and then she interrupted me again, “Yes. It just doesn’t feel right. And I only know you and Gareth. It would be awkward for me celebrating.”

Ok, I think she wanted a response. I didn’t wait long before saying, “I am sorry to hear that. Either my family or Gareth’s family would welcome you if you came. If you reconsider just let me know.” I waited for a while before returning to studying. She didn’t say anything else before I went to sleep.

The next day Callem was particularly hard on us. Stretching was done with constant corrections under his gaze. I was really close on one of my splits but Callem’s pushed me past my comfort range today with a firm hand pressing down on my shoulder. I wasn’t the only victim. Callem then said everyone’s focus was wandering and when that happened you were unprepared to react in battle. So today every time anyone lost focus every one would pay the consequences.

The day progressed with Callem ‘finding’ people wandering in their focus and punishing everyone. At least he didn’t pick on me and Leda exclusively. It was a painful day all around.

After dinner, we had an hour before the gift exchange. The exchange would take place in the Callem’s farmhouse so we gathered our gifts and went to the couches at the appointed time. I was a little excited and Callem started. He had a book for everyone, Gareth’s was about dungeons, of course, Surviving Your First Delve. My book was about weapon runic inscriptions, Bran's Guide to Selecting and Inscribing Basic Weapon Runes. It was extremely thick and I was paging through it so missed what the other books were about.

Wynna was next to give out gifts. She gave each of us an enchanted light stone. The stones were similar to the stone I had recently purchased but had a wider range of brightness and longer life after a recharge. They were made with tier 5 aether dust based on the descriptor note in the wooden gift boxes they came in. Leda whispered that they were extremely expensive. We were all playing with the stones when Callem asked who was next Leda jumped in.

Leda gave Gareth another book on dungeons. It was a guidebook to the two local dungeons on Titan’s Shield for new delvers. Leda gave Aelyn an enchanted bracelet but I didn’t catch what it did as she whispered it to Aelyn. She handed Cilia a pair of boots that excited her and I assumed were also enchanted besides being 'stylish'. The benefits of having a family in the business of enchanting I guessed. My gift was a massive tome, another book. The title of the book was volumes I, II, and III on the basics of runic enchanting bound into a single book. Leda explained that the tome included all basics for connecting basic primer runes in enchanting. She also said I could have her books on the primers I had borrowed. I was ecstatic about her gift. If I ever had time to practice enchanting, I would at least have the references I needed to experiment.

Cilia was next and she had stylish outfits for everyone. Her uncle was apparently a famous tailor in the capital. I pretended excitement but knew I would probably grow out of the outfit quickly. I was in the middle of a growth spurt. Well, I could wear it to the festival at least. Callem went and brought out some of the red juice and the remaining eclairs and some cookies. With three of us left Gareth went next.

Gareth got each of the girls leather armor, just the upper body. As they brought out the armor I thought they fit the girl's curves a little too well. The suits were made by Master Aldrich so were high quality but I still wondered how Gareth relayed the girl's dimensions so accurately, maybe Wynna helped?

Callem was next and Gareth got him a large case of spices. Every hot spice you could imagine. Callem was super pleased with the gift. Gareth’s gift for Wynna was a heavy blanket throw. It was made by a popular quilter in the city. I was up next and excited. What had my best friend gotten me? Two pairs of underwear and socks. I tried to act excited and Gareth said they were the same underwear he had been bragging about for months. When I asked him if these were the same ones he had worn. He flushed red and said no. He had another gift for me, a very nice cloak that was a dark green. I think it matched the one he had walked around in when it was raining. I appreciated the cloak, it was a fine gift.

It was my turn next. Before I could present my gifts. Callem presented everyone with the axes and a set of throwing daggers I had made. The throwing daggers were the size and weight that each person preferred during practice. He then brought out the weapons I had made for everyone. Everyone knew these gifts were coming but they still were super excited. Cilia and Leda were not aware I had made them, they thought I had just procured them. Callem reminded everyone not to flash these weapons around as the quality was exceptional and it may attract attention.

After the excitement died down I got to give out my gifts. Yes everyone was getting more from me. I started with Wynna’s wine, six bottles. She smiled and thanked me as she had selected the vintages herself. Next up were the potion belts with the potions. I read the labels in passing them out and Wynna had gotten the intermediate brews inside of the minor ones. I didn’t think Callem would ever wear the belt but I was planning to make him some blades early in the new year so this would do for now. Gareth was probably the happiest of all, exactly what a delver needed. He nearly flipped when he noticed the vials were the hardened runic vials that adventurers used.

The next gift I produced was for Leda. It was the spell book for *Arcane Missile* and she was thrilled. The last gift I had was for Aelyn and it was another spell book. She was extremely happy and hugged me since she had been sitting next to me. This prompted Leda to get up and do the same. Gareth then jumped up and hugged me as well laughing the entire time but Aelyn and Leda had retreated away from me so he couldn’t dog pile me and them together which is what I suspected was his goal. The gift exchange was a big success and everyone was happy as we headed off to bed.

I went to the cellar and put all my gifts into storage. Tomorrow I would get to see my family and hopefully have a few days off from the riggers of training. I planned to mentally relax and enjoy myself. No spells, stretching, obstacle courses, sword training, or enchanting.