**Chapter 17 The Carnival**

Freya wore her new blue birthday dress with blue ribbons and looked adorable. I had secreted coins into the bottom of my new backpack with some drinks. My belt pouch contained four gold, a few silver, and large coppers. I also had Wigand’s book and planned to return it to him. I hoped to be able to sneak away during the carnival to finish my business with Wigand today.

On the road to the city, Freya said she first wanted to see the play *Ashton’s Valor*. It was a common ballad about a woman who became a knight and rescued her true love. It was two hours long, but the other kids in town told Freya it was awesome. After that, she wanted to play some of the games for prizes or, more precisely, have Gareth or me win her some prizes. Then she wanted to go to the beast menagerie with various monsters and beasts from the lands throughout the Sphere. Then she wanted to see one of the magicians perform real magic. To top off her birthday, she wanted to get a ride on the unicorn, which Gwen had not been able to do. Also, if time permits, she wanted to see the baby dragon. I doubted it was a real dragon. Probably just a drake hatchling or common lizard.

As we got to the city, there was a massive airship sitting in the fields just outside of the city. The massive vessel made me think of Noah’s ark from its prodigious size. Painted on the side in the sizeable familiar script was The Wonders of the Sphere, Traveling Carnival. Surrounding the airship was a tent city. Around the tent city was a short wooden fence. It was a fantastic sight covering maybe a half mile square (800 m). In addition to the carnival airship, several visible airships and skyships were docked inside the city limits, with more coming and going. Freya answered the question before I asked, “They are only performing here. The Triumvirate is just allowing them one week to put on their shows for some stupid security reason. But it has brought thousands of people from all over Skyholme, even nobles from the capital!”

I looked at the people milling about around the tents. Even from here, I could see half a dozen Wolfguard escorting important-looking people in finery and a large array of clothing from low to high born. Freya pointed, “Look, the Blackguard!” I turned to see a Wolfguard in a trim black leather uniform outside the fenced area. Freya continued, “There are supposedly three hundred Blackguards in the city to keep the peace and watch the performers. At least, that is the rumor. Gwen said she counted no less than fifty when she was here two days ago, but that is probably a lie.” Well, anything Gwen said was a lie, according to Freya.

We reached the fence gate where people were entering. We saw hawkers for food and souvenirs from around the sphere as we approached the crowd. Others were walking advertisements for the various large tents that housed specific shows.

The paths were getting crowded, but Freya led us straight to a ticket vendor and I gave him a shiny gold, which the man licked before returning me 30 tickets, nine large silver, and seven silver coins. Freya then dragged us to one of the larger tents with a big advertisement on it for the performance of *Ashton’s Valor*. It cost us three tickets each to enter. Inside there was a large stage set up and seating for maybe five hundred people.

A quick inquiry had the next show starting in 40 minutes. We were early and learned the front row, where we first tried to sit, was considered ‘principal’ seating by the young elf male who was acting as an usher.

Those seats were larger, padded, and right in front of the stage but cost ten tickets each. Freya gave me her puppy dog eyes, and I gave the elf usher three silver coins for the center front-row seats. Soon after we had sat down, the stands behind us started to fill quickly, and you could hear the hawker outside yelling the countdown to the start of the show.

A young woman in finery sat next to me and looked me over before holding her nose up and trying to avoid acknowledging my presence. A man I assumed was her father sat next to her. Freya was between me and Gareth, and I decided to make the best of the situation by ignoring the young woman and enjoying myself.

I ordered us drinks and a snack. The drink ended up being a ginger beer, nonalcoholic, that was chilled and quite good after you got past the bite. The snack was salted caramelized nuts, but I couldn’t place what kind of nuts through the salt and sweetness. Gareth ordered some meat on a stick which I paid for as well, and the meat reminded me of sweet teriyaki chicken but chewier during consumption.

Soon the show did start, and I turned briefly to the stands behind us to find every seat had been filled. I counted fifty luxury seats and estimated another 500 other seats. So that would be around two gold per show they netted, plus more for the food and drinks. I had spent one silver and six large copper alone on snacks and drinks. They did four shows a day, so maybe this troupe netted ten gold a day? My musings ended as the show got underway.

The show was put on entirely by elves. They had many varying body types, like humans. These elves were mostly slender, at least the ones that were in the cast. They also did have a unique charisma to them. The lead actor was a gorgeous elven woman with dark hair and aquamarine eyes. She was very good at her part and drew you in when she spoke. Actually, all the actors were excellent. The play was similar to a modern performance of Shakespeare, except they had the added benefit of illusion magic for special effects. I could see the two elven mages casting spells far off-stage. In all, there were maybe 20 elves in the troupe. I scolded myself for putting effort into sorting the behind-the-scenes work. I returned to focus on just enjoying the performance.

The play was two hours, but definitely worth it. It had a lot of romance, comedy, action, and magical special effects to entertain the audience. The cast got a standing ovation when it ended. As we were leaving, Gareth was clearly smitten by the lead elf woman. He kept staring back at her as we were getting ready to leave. Well, his teenage hormones were starting to kick in.

Being in the front row, we got the unexpected extra benefit of meeting the five leads in the cast as we were leaving. This made Freya ecstatic, and I was sure she would be bragging to Gwen non-stop about it. The young woman who sat next to me handed one of the male actors a large silver and complimented him on his performance, and she had that same infatuation look Gareth had for the lead actress.

I guess it was normal to tip actors? I used my ability on the lead elf woman.

*Niserie Imiduis*

*Elf Female*

*Age 148*

*Disposition: Indifferent*

I pulled out a shiny gold coin and handed it to the lead woman with a slight flourish so the snobby girl who sat next to me could see, “Your performance was marvelous, Niserie. My friend, Gareth, and sister, Freya, greatly enjoyed the show.” I said with respect, giving a partial bow. “Please accept this coin on behalf of your entire troupe.” Yes, I was trying to be spiteful to the young woman who had looked down on me; she gave just a large silver in appreciation! Well, here is a gold coin worth ten times that amount!

Niserie locked eyes with me. Damn, she was more beautiful this close. She then clasped her hands over mine and said, “Thank you for your generosity, young man. Perhaps you will see a second showing.” Her touch sent pleasant tingles to every extremity of my body. And her intoxicating smile fogged my brain. Maybe my hormones were ragging too! They were trying to get past my aether core heartburn.

I stammered a response, “Uh…sorry Niser..ie…we only have…come…have time for the one.” Freya’s face was laughing at me, while Gareth had a shadow of jealousy on his. Well, next time, Gareth, you can give the damn coin! We were pushed along and out of the tent by the remaining people in the front row who were waiting to thank the actors. Outside I was sweating a bit, even in the cool air.

Gareth seemed to catch his breath, “Whoa. That was great, but I think one or two of those elves had some type of charisma ability!” Yes, that was it! I just nodded at Gareth’s intuition.

Freya spoke, “Guys, come on! We don’t have much time before they close down for the day.” She started dragging us, and we could clearly see the countdown showing the carnival was open for another eight hours! What did Freya think, that we would stay for eight more hours?

She dragged us to the rows of small tents with games. “Gareth and Storme, win me a prize!” It was kind of a demand, not a request, by her tone. The tents were crowded with people trying the games. I found something to try. It looked like a mini laser rifle shooting game. You had six shots to hit six targets. I paid for my chance with a ticket and picked up the metallic rifle with Gareth and Freya looking on.

It was somewhat heavy, and I extended my metal shaping sense into the rifle. There was a spell form inside! Pulling the trigger activated it, casting the small flashy bolt out the end. The sights seemed like a normal rifle, but…there something was wrong at the barrel’s end. Oh, this was interesting. The end of the spell form had a metal gyroscope inset at the nozzle. Each time you fired, it ‘wiggled’ the bolt a little. So even with the targets being just 10 feet away, hitting them would make it hard. I used my metal shaping skill to steady the gyroscope and quickly went six for six on the targets before handing the rifle back to the stunned Carnie. Freya got a pair of red silk ribbons for her prize. I didn’t tell Gareth; he tried the rifle game thrice before giving up.

A short walk later, Gareth took on the challenge of catching and putting balls into large cans. You stood at one end, and six young ball tossers threw 60 softballs at you. You needed to catch and dunk 10 of the same color before they hit the ground. The balls were different sizes, weights, and three different colors. The better you did, the faster the balls came from the tossers. Gareth did it on his first attempt. Freya got a small jar of hard candy for her prize this time.

The last game we played was against other carnival goers. It was like skee ball. The first competitor to get 12 balls into the single hole down the ramp won. Of course, there were 12 stations. Gareth got a little too pumped up, wanting to win. All three of us played the first game, and we lost. Gareth played three more times before giving up. There was a smug kid with a Wolfguard behind him who kept beating Gareth by a single ball. We had to pull him away from the game.

Our next stop was the beast menagerie. It was the biggest tent of all. The tent was sectioned off with wooden walls to separate the exhibits. Each stop had a showman telling of the beast and where it came from within the Sphere, and how dangerous it was. It had cost each of us two tickets to enter, and we moved with a group of 20 or so from exhibit to exhibit. The first exhibit was a panther the size of a horse. Its eyes were coal black; if the lighting hadn’t highlighted the beast in the large cage, it would have been hard to find it in the shadowy enclosure. The announcer said the beast hunted the Jungles of Terminalia and was the apex predator there.

The next exhibit was a large water tank with three mermen in it. Gareth commented it would have been better with a female of the species. We were told the mermen lived in massive underwater cities across the Sphere. These three were ‘rescued’ from a leviathan by the carnival. It was interesting to watch them swim, but soon we moved on. The next monster gave us a scare, a nine-foot-tall snow-white yeti. It was chained. It was clearly unhappy with its fate, and red-brown eyes burned with hate. We moved quickly to the next exhibit as the beast had an intimidating aura.

The next exhibit was a small ice elemental the size of a cat. It was snowing in its enclosure, and the walking ice statue was not overly interesting otherwise. Soon we were moving from exhibit to exhibit. A troglodyte, a bullywug, a giant forest python, a stegosaurus, an imp, three kobolds, a trap door spider, an owlbear, and their piece de resistance in the final exhibit was an adult griffon who was actually tamed. There was a quick sketch artist at the griffon, and he would sketch you riding the griffon for two silver. We passed on it as you did not actually get to sit on the griffon. The walk-through took two hours, and we saw and heard a lot. Seeing the beasts up close that we had read about in stories was eerie.

Next on Freya’s list was a magician. There were multiple acts to choose from, and as we were looking, Gareth talked her into seeing the acrobat troupe instead. So we spent an hour watching ten acrobats do amazing feats that would make an Olympic gymnast go pale in fright. We were all enthralled as every display they did seemed to defy common sense. I thought these tickets were well spent and hoped Callem didn’t see this show and get some ideas to add to the obstacle course.

The last two items on Freya’s list, the dragon tent, and unicorn, had extremely long lines. I didn’t want to wait, so I talked Gareth into waiting with her while I went to the city to visit Wigand’s bookstore. We agreed where we would meet up later. The meeting location was one of the fence gates monitored by ticket sellers near the city side of the enclosure. Since the city was crowded and there were Wolfsguard around, I didn’t fear the gang of kids that had molested me in the past.

Getting out of the tent city took a little while as the population density had grown. I heard someone saying more adult acts were performed later in the evening. I was slightly curious, but I had things to do. There was also some pyrotechnic display just before the main exhibits and attractions closed, so the crowd was growing to see that since it was essentially free. Also, I could smell dozens of food vendors sending aromas into the air, which slowed me. I had not eaten since the play. I was checking the food on display as I passed. Maybe I could get inspiration for my own cooking?

The other large tent in the complex maze was the trader’s tent. I wish we had gone there as I am sure there would have been many items of interest to purchase. I planned to run to Wigand’s and get back here to convince Freya to go shopping.

I noticed a large number of city guards on duty with the influx of people into the city as I entered the city gates. The streets were crowded, and I heard several people say what a dumpy little city this was. I am sure it was compared to the capital. I pushed on toward my goal. Thankfully Wigand was open. I entered to find six customers browsing his shelves, and he was hawkishly watching them. “Wigand?” He jumped at my voice.

“Oh, Storme! Good to see you!” His facial expression did not match his greeting, as the volume of customers probably stressed him. “I have your book…give me one second while I go grab it.” He went into the back room, and I took the opportunity to pull out the Skyholme Naval text. When he returned with the large book in a fresh leather binding, he said, “Very good! I had forgotten I had loaned you this book.” I took the large tome I had purchased and placed it into my pack while he returned his book to the shelf behind him.

He turned to face me, “So Storme, what else can I help you and your patron with?”

I just shook my head, “Nothing currently. I want to return to the festivities, but I wanted to browse your shelves for a bit.” His face creased in thought.

He leaned in and whispered low to me, “I have some new spells you might be interested in…just got them. Forty gold each,” he winked at me. “Rare spells. Condense ice and Ice Shield.” Those spells were more uncommon than rare, and neither interested me currently.

“Not today Wigand. I just don’t have the coins,” I walked into the aisle where his magical references were located. He followed my movements and the other six patrons in the store. It took a few minutes for me to find the book I was looking for, Introduction to Your Magic Skill Affinity. I read the text over a year ago. It mostly described the 23 magic skill spheres and how having a tier one or tier two affinity affected your practice of spells within that sphere. I found the passage I was looking for near the end.

If you are fortunate enough to be bestowed with a tier-two skill affinity in a magic sphere you will most likely be able to imprint spells for a lower cost. It is generally accepted that a tier 2 spell can be imprinted for the cost of a tier 1 spell. Tier 3 spells can be imprinted for the cost of a tier 2 spell. Reducing the cost of tier 4 spells requires higher skill affinity than tier 2. It should also be noted that even with a skill affinity of two, mages are not always successful in reducing imprinting costs. You should purchase a high-quality spellbook with good spell forms to ensure a successfully reduced-cost imprinting. Spellbooks from dungeons are highly suggested as they always ensure a reduced spell cost.

I read the passage twice before returning it to the shelf. I was uncertain if this was an attempt by the conglomerate that made spell books to get new mages to purchase more expensive spell books or if it was, in fact, true. I would have to either try it or find someone to advise me.

I slipped out the front door while Wigand was busy with another customer who was paying for two books. I was not planning to return to Wigand’s store anytime soon.

I made my way down the street, and my focus was split on thinking and avoiding traffic. I was suddenly shoved strongly into an alley. I swore in disbelief. I hadn’t been paying enough attention and was going to give the idiot a piece of my mind. There were five boys my age blocking the exit to the street concourse. I recognized all of them. I crawled deeper into the alley before scrambling to my feet. This was not good. I reached down, yes, my knife was on my hip, drew it, and took a defensive stance.

A larger shadow filled the mouth of the alley, and I was screwed. Wait...he wore a city guard uniform. A smug grin came on my face as I said, “Don’t look behind you boys, but you all are done for.” The red-haired boy laughed. Soon I could see why. The guard was also red-haired and shared features of the gang leader. Fuck.

Ok, Storme. Pull your shit together. I positioned my body and feet with the blade. All the boys produced clubs except the red-haired boy who had that stupid short iron blade I had made in our first encounter. Not to worry, I told myself. They had range, but I had the skill and better movement speed. Three of them could come at me at most, and I would just have to injure one quickly. The guard turned his back to the alley, probably making sure no one disturbed his brother’s mugging.

I had been gaining more and more confidence as the boys refused to advance. I mean, I thought I looked pretty confident. Callem had taught me well with a sword; a dagger was just a really shorter sword. Two of the boys smirked. Go time was coming. Then I heard a scraping of a hard shoe on a stone behind me. I turned in time to see a girl swing a club. My quick feet sidestepped, and the club barely touched my shoulder. My dagger slashed her arm as I moved behind her, putting her between me and the advancing boys. The girl was tough; she dropped the club but didn’t cry out. She moved to the side and let the boys pass as she wrapped her arm. I backpedaled and kept my ears on alert for more ambushers behind.

I realized my mistake too late. The alley started to widen quickly, which allowed the boys to surround me. I turned to run, but my heart fell. The alley was dead, and I was now 50 feet into it. Even if I screamed, I was sure no one would come with the city guardsman at the entrance.

At first, I hadn’t wanted to kill anyone, but the look in their eyes made me fear for my life. I got the wall at my back and waited for them to make their move. The girl was out of it, as I was sure I had cut the tendon in the forearm of her dominant hand. So it was just five-on-one. Great odds, right? The red-haired boy who had claimed the short sword I had dropped started ordering his thugs. It was going to be an all-out assault, meaning I would have to take the initiative.

Just before they attacked, I moved quickly to the right and got a weak swing on my back as I moved too close for the boy to hit me with full strength. My dagger cut through his quad muscle and to the side of his thigh. As he dropped, I rolled away, planning to run back to the mouth of the alley and tackle the guard out into the pedestrian traffic, screaming bloody murder.

I came out of my roll too slow, though, and the red-haired boy got me in the temple with the hilt of the sword. It was a lucky swing on his part as he had been planning to strike me in the side with the blade, but I was too fast…well, not fast enough. I stumbled from the blow, slightly dazed but lost my sense of direction and ran into the stone wall. I knocked my head as I had not quite braced myself.

I was groggy when I came to and heard voices. “….what the…” “….so much….” “….how many gold…” “…is that a platinum…” My head was clearing up, except I didn’t like what I was now puzzling out from the voices. “We should kill him.” A number of voices opposed this suggestion.

“He isn’t a lord, and he probably stole all these coins,” the red-haired boy was trying to convince his friends. They had emptied my pack on the ground, and my new book was soaking up gutter water. My coin purse on my hip was gone, and they found the wrapped-up coins at the bottom of my bag. God damn it. I tried to rise.

“He is up. Beat him to unconsciousness.” It was the red-haired guard who had given the command. Greed was heavy in his eyes as our eyes met. I was too woozy to defend myself effectively other than back up as the clubs started raining down. My dagger was nowhere near me. They were not overly strong but kept targeting my head and ribs, and my wrists and fingers were soon broken as I covered my head.

Darkness was coming, and I felt a blade push through my chest, the fucking blade I had made in haste in our first encounter. One of the kids swore, “What the demon-cursed shit, Leon! You killed him! Why?” The irony of being killed by my own creation was not lost on me. I couldn’t see anymore, just a blurry red haze. Blood was in my lungs as I struggled to take a breath.

A few greedy street toughs ruined all my big plans. I was dead, and I knew it. My ears heard them stream out of the alley, leaving me to bleed out. I reached within myself, trying to find the spell I had been trying to learn for five days. I had been close if I could just…seconds felt like hours while I struggled to overlay the spell forms…damn it! Imprint ALREADY! I felt something click in my mind and pushed my aether through the spell form a few times, directing the flows to my organs before passing out.

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Arturo watched as the city guardsman and local kids streamed from the alley. They were excited about something. The boy had probably just been mugged. It wasn’t his concern. He was in the city due to the carnival, tracking the workers that ventured into the city. Minutes passed, and the boy didn’t emerge. After nearly an hour, Arturo dropped his chameleon ring effect, stepped away from the wall, and headed toward the alley.

He was cautious entering but, noticing the broken body on the ground, started walking purposely forward. Damn, lots of blood and the boy’s head and hands were a complete mess. Maybe if he hadn’t waited so long to enter the alley, the boy might have lived? Probably not.

The boy’s chest rose slightly and fell. Arturo squatted down in the blood pool and looked more closely at the boy. He was breathing very shallowly and strained. He moved the shirt where a blade had obviously punctured the boy’s chest garment. The wound was closed… This young boy suddenly got a lot more interesting.