Chapter 65 (Arc 2 Chapter 19)

Sammie was happy when she went to join the others.  Talia had been next and still hadn’t emerged, so I had the meatballs browning in the oven as I prepared a lot of sauce.  One of the keys to great meatballs is getting the right balance of fat into the sauce.  Too little and the sauce is bland; too much and it is greasy.  That was why I watched the meatballs brown. If the meat was too lean, I would need to add some fat to the sauce while it marinated at a simmer.  That was another mistake a lot of people made.  They didn’t let the meatballs simmer in the sauce long enough before serving, letting the flavors blend.  My thoughts were interrupted as Talia emerged from the sunroom.

She looked happy but just went and sat on the couch.  She didn’t move to the kitchen to give me any information.  Fine.  I watched Remy head in next.  I wasn’t expecting much from the kid.  He was going to be our introductory healer.  I turned the meatballs over and pureed the boiling sauce with a mixer.  The mixer was used to make whip cream but it worked well here.

When Remy emerged, he had the paper in front of him, still reading it as he walked into the kitchen.  He placed the paper down and oriented toward me.  I tried to read the boy...was it shock?  Disappointment? I cleaned my hands and looked at his page.

I couldn’t read it.  It was in a language I was not familiar with.  Remy seeing my confusion, answered, “My native tongue is different.”  I remembered Wynna saying the sheet would conform itself to whatever script the target was most comfortable with on my first reading.

“Well, you can tell me whatever you want then,” I said, moving the paper toward the stove and seeking a cue from him that it was ok to destroy. He nodded, and I sent it up in flames.

He moved close and whispered to me, “I have two abilities.  *Healing hands,* which is tier 1.  The other is *hibernate*, also a tier 1 ability.”

He looked at me for approval.  Hibernate allowed a person to sleep for years and not age.  It requires you to have enough fat stores to make it through the period at a lower metabolic rate.  It was not a useful ability for Remy.  I supported him, though, “Two tier 1 abilities! That is great!”  He cracked a smile and resumed.

“I have three traits.  Mathematician at tier 2, thermal sight at tier 1, and cryptologist at tier 2.” he shank into himself a bit.  The *thermal sight* just meant he could see heat signatures at night.  The other two skills were interesting.  Maybe he could be my accountant?  Not so much for money but tracking purchasing and dungeon harvests.  He definitely wasn’t built for delving.  But for right now, he was my only healer...unless I joined the devle, and I preferred the safety outside of the ley line dungeons.

“That is awesome.  We can definitely use your skills,” I said with a smile.

“I have proficiencies as well.  But some of them I don’t understand.”  He turned to a face of concentration, “Mechanical engineering is tier 4, and mathematics is tier 4.  I was only taught basic numbers by my father when I was young.  I remember picking it up easily, but when he disappeared, I stopped.”

My mind was in high gear. Remys skill set was that of an engineer...strong math and engineering.  I knew spaceships existed on the outside of the sphere.  The high aether concentration on the inside of the sphere interfered with conventional electronics unless they were hardened against it.  Also, with magic being so prevalent, it was unnecessary for most civilizations to invest heavily in manufacturing. From our evening conversations with Wynna, I knew the closer you got to the massive tunnels in the sphere, the more likely you were to find aether and technology blended.  Gunpowder was not used because it was too easy to ignite with simple magics.  My eyes focused on Remy, “Yes, Remy.  We can definitely use your skills.”

He left to go sit and converse with the others as I got all the meatballs into the sauce and started working on the spaghetti. Just flour, eggs, salt, some oil, and a touch of seasoning. The dough was done when Lana came to the kitchen. She held her sheet to her chest like it was something precious. My hands were sticky with dough, and I waited on the tiny girl to reveal what she pleased.

She looked at the simmering pot and the dough and then into my eyes as she reluctantly handed me the sheet. I said, “You can choose what you want to tell me. I do not have to see all your secrets.” I tried to sound as supportive as possible.

She shook her head no, “Sammie and Remy told you everything. You are giving all of us an opportunity beyond our dreams. You can see everything.” She held out the paper confidently to me, and I took it. I was feeling old with the weight of responsibility and the trust these young people were putting on me. My demeanor had definitely evolved since I had awakened, and Callem’s trying had given me lots of confidence. The snippets of my past life also helped, but they were getting foggier and foggier.

The paper read;

***Abilities***

*Aether Infusion, Tier 1*

*Precise Auditory Recall, Tier 1*

***Traits***

*Adaptive, Tier 1*

*Fearless, Tear 1*

***Affinities***

*Illusion Magic, Tier 4*

***Aether Core:*** *44*

***Max Aether Core:*** *77*

***Aether Matrix:*** *23*

***Max Aether Matrix:*** *32*

*Aether infusion* allowed a mage to recharge their aether core quicker. And the precise auditory recall meant she could remember any sound she heard. Her aether matrix and aether core were large enough to become a very successful mage. A step or two below an archmage.

“How?” I asked, confused.

Lana shrunk back a little, “What? Is it not good? I thought…” Tears were starting to form.

I clarified to stop the waterworks, “How did no one find you? You have the tools to be a very talented mage, maybe exceptional.” What I said was true. A tier 4 illusion magic affinity meant she could imprint tier 4 illusion spells at the cost of just 2 on her aether matrix instead of 8. I didn’t know any tier 4 illusion spells off the top of my head, but I wouldn’t mind investing in some for her. I addressed Lana, “First off, you are hired.” I reached into my pocket, summoned a roll of 100 large silver coins, and handed them to her. I reached below the counter and summoned a spellbook. “Second, you will be learning this spell next. I produced my tier 3 dimensional closet spellbook for her.”

Lana was stunned and crying as she fingered the roll of silver coins in one hand and touched the spellbook on the counter. She spoke, “I stole the book.” Her eyes were unfocused. “The invisibility spellbook. I stole it. After I learned the spell, I returned it, I swear.” She was sobbing. Wynna was coming to check on her, but I signaled it was fine.

“And did you steal the dimensional spell too?” I asked.

“No! No!” she pleaded. “I just studied it in the library at night after I snuck in while I was invisible. It took me almost a year. I never told anyone I had magic. If I did, I would have ended up like Remy, enslaved to an organization. I just went through the academy hoping to graduate.”

Even with her *fearless* trait, she was acting meek and timid. Fearless just meant she was immune to fear effects from spells and auras. It didn’t affect how she would act it just kept her mind clear enough to act in dangerous situations.

“Ok, Lana. Is it ok if I share your information with a magic instructor? She may train you for free. If not, I will pay her.” Lana actually had more potential than Talai in magic. I asked another question, “You said you graduated from a lower city academy? What did you study?”

Lana blushed, “I…I didn’t graduate,” she admitted. “I just cleaned the building for food and a bed.” This admission finally made everything make sense on how she had been overlooked.

“How old are you then?” I asked. She was tiny and a bit grimy. If she had just graduated from the academy, then she would have been between 22 and 23. Now that I knew she had not…

“I am not sure…” she paused. “I think 16.”

“And how did your information end in my folio when I was doing interviews?” I asked with a smirk, already knowing the answer.

“I…I…I put it there,” she returned my smirk, having finally gotten comfortable with the fact I was not going to throw her out.

We rejoined the group in the living room after I destroyed her paper. We socialized for an hour as the group got comfortable with each other, and then I went and cut the pasta, boiled it, tossed it in garlic butter, and served everyone meatballs on top. Sammie and Callem seemed to have a contest on who could eat more, each having multiple portions. Callem took the delve team, Aelyn included, out to the farm. I left to go talk with Isla.

Isla was not in her room above the tavern in town. She must be with Loriel and the group that came today to watch the action. I tried Selina next, and she was in her rented house. I spent an hour getting help with my aether shield spell before broaching the topic of Lana.

Selina was so interested in the girl she left me to head out to the farm. It was getting late in the evening. I thought about looking for Mia. Maybe she would want to practice with her stylus. I didn’t find her in the barracks, so I went and made five globes in the enchanting lab to keep my mind occupied.

When I retired to my room that evening, Gareth was not there. I set up my privacy screen and alarms. I studied the *aether shield* spell, did my exercises, meditation, created some coins, and read some dungeon-delving books. I was having trouble sleeping, and images of Tessa kept popping into my head. My delayed pubescence was taking hold. I used my focus exercises to eliminate my excitement but, in the end, gave in to the image of Tessa. A quick use of my cleanliness spell and I was asleep after.

The new week started with Elijah doing our conditioning since Aelyn was out bonding with her new team. We ended up not seeing her at all during the week and everyone began to miss her as Elijah had managed to be even harder on us that Aelyn. I realized how much leeway she had been giving me in particular.

My nights out at Twin Rocks were not anymore fun either. My *aether shield* spell was imprinted on 3rd day, and Elora and Elijah had taken to attacking me from opposite sides when I used the overdrive mode of the *lightning reflexes* spell. I wasn’t sure if this was a good sign or not, but it did level my *aether shield* spell quickly.

My spell progress as a while was doing well. Aether shield had reached level 6 in just this week. My evolutions were *quick cast* at level one, allowing me to establish the shield in a blink. At level two, I went for *dual cast* to maintain two shields. At level three, I strengthened the shield so it could last longer and it could even take my weight. At level 5 I took the standard fixed evolution. This allowed the shield to remain stationary instead of moving with my body’s orientation. I could use it as a step to add height to my leaps and do insane flips in the air. The step was invisible to anyone without aether site, so I thought I would look amazing.

I even confirmed I could use the spell-like steps. I cast two, walked to the second step, disappeared the first step to creating a 3rd high step, and just repeated. I liked aether spells because your imagination was the limit for their utility.

Aether lock had also reached level 6, and at level 5, I had taken the evolution of shatter arcane lock. This allowed me to break another mages aether lock spell by ‘unweaving it.’ Privacy reached level 9, a two-level increase but no evolutions.

The most interesting effect was my alarm spell. At level 13, I discovered a unique evolution that was not mentioned in the text. It protected the mage from the flash effect of the spell. In other words, I wouldn’t see the flash at all. This was used to an interesting effect when I fought Elora and Elijah, as I could keep chaining the flashes and disrupt them. Both had some blind-fighting ability, but going back and forth with the flashes got them disoriented enough that I could sometimes win against both of them in overdrive mode.

The lightning reflexes spell made it all the way to level 16, which I thought was amazing in itself. I had a very difficult decision to make at level 17.

My cleanliness, obfuscate abilities, and dimensional closet all gained one level with no evolutions. Mend flesh had reached level 14, giving me an evolution at level 13. This evolution was called *body sculpting (self)*. I had thought of it after seeing how perfect Tessa and all her fellow students looked. Right now, I could just use it on myself, and I could only tighten my skin and remove fat. I was happy with the way I looked, so I didn’t use the spell on myself, but maybe future evolutions would allow me to use it on others. I was planning to learn a new healing spell in the not-too-distant future, so these vanity upgrades were acceptable.

As the sixth day came, everyone was excited to get out from Elijah’s supervision and get Aelyn back for next week. I think that might have been his plan all along. Even more exciting was next week was the last week of our semester. We had two more semesters to look forward to. Some students were stressed about competency testing, but I doubted anyone would fail.

Gareth asked me what I was doing on my 7th day. I told him I planned to head to Aegis city with Aelyn to meet Isla at the restaurant. He asked to join us as the twins were going home, and he didn’t need to study. I was still trying to keep my dungeon team a secret from Gareth, but he had his suspicions. I hadn’t spent much time with Gareth so agreed. But I made one massive miscalculation. There was only one skyship from Hen’s Hollow to Aegis city every day. My dungeon crew practicing out at the farm were also returning to Aegis city on the 6th day, and I hadn’t had time to warn them that Gareth was in the dark.

It only took Lana coming up to me excited on the deck to tell me about her progress with Selina. Lana was very petite and cute once she cleaned up. Gareth immediately butted in, “Stormy, I didn’t know you made some new friends! My name is Gareth. Gareth Highguard.”

I supposed I was going to have to get used to this every time a semi-attractive young woman was around me. “Damn Gareth, we are going to have to ask Wynna and Ennet to do another reading on you. I think they missed one of your abilities or traits.”

Gareth perked up, “Really, Stormy? What did they miss?”

With my best delivery, I said, “Philanderer extraordinaire, tier 7.”

Lana and Gareth looked confused and my joke fell flat. After the crickets stopped, Lana indicated a smiling Gareth, “Is he on our dungeon delve team too?” Gareth’s eyes got wider and wider. So wide, Lana looked scared.

“Stormy, did she just say what I think she just said? Because if she said what I think she did, then we need to talk!” In a comically exaggerated act, Gareth put his arm around Lana and ushered her off to the side to talk with her. “So Lana, please tell e everything about this delve team. Every. Single. Detail.” He turned to look at me with a wink, and Lana looked like a mouse under a cat’s paw. Well, guess I couldn’t keep it secret forever.