***Chapter 30 Enchanting Primers***

The next day was much of the same as our first day training except I had to make lunch as well as dinner today because Wynna was heading into town. I gave her a note for my parents and another note for Freya as well. I just wanted them to know I was doing well. Gareth, seeing me do this also scribbled a short note to his parents.

Gareth was also in a much better mood. So, Aelyn had been correct in that my moving to his loft would solve a lot of his insecurities. I prepped the mini burgers as I had planned and for lunch, I put a pea soup simmering, got rosemary bread ready, and thin-sliced some smoked bear meat into a marinade to soften it up. I mixed some herbs in a creamy cheese to make a spread to go with the bear meat and bread. I didn't have any free time this morning for extra studies.

After the long three-hour hand combat practice I healed everyone and we had lunch. It was the first time that Cilia commented on my cooking skills saying everything was delicious and even better than the academy cooks. Was that a compliment from the ice queen? Her comments had everyone including Callem pause to stare at her. It was like everyone was silently asking if Storme had cracked her icy exterior with just his cooking? She responded by continuing to eat and just mumbled with a full mouth, “it is true.”

Gareth moved all my things after lunch while I just studied and started to trace out the spell forms for the *obfuscate* spell. Conditioning seemed to come too soon for me and Callem was feeling a little mischievous today. We had to run all three obstacle courses back to back to back and would all start together as well. The winner would get to take off from combat practice tomorrow. Ugh, I knew that would be Gareth and he would turn down the reward.

When we started I was practically tackled by Leda. She was trying to help Cilia get a lead on me for sure. Gareth and Aelyn were already a few steps ahead of us and I was a little pissed off with the skullduggery. I recovered quickly and in less than a minute had caught Leda and hip-checked her into some netting as revenge. She wouldn’t recover from that! I pushed myself even harder and soon was coming up on Cilia. A bag tipped arrow hit my knee causing me to lose a few steps and develop a slight limp. I took a second to glare at Callem but he just had a big smile on his face.

Rather than interfere with Cilia I just tried to pass her with my own efforts which spurred her on. We were both well off the pace of Gareth and Aelyn so we were racing for third. After we entered the third course I was a good ten yards in front of her and knew I had the win locked up. Callem didn’t think so and had turned from harassing Gareth and Aelyn to just focusing on me.

What the fuck? A storm of arrows and swinging bags were released on me. I eventually got knocked off a beam and fell seven feet (2m) to the hard earth, knocking the wind from me. I needed to cast a heal to gather myself and climb back up and in that time Cilia had gotten a lead back. Leda was cheering for her friend from way back in the course but that just got me angry and I put all my effort into trying to catch her. My efforts were not wasted as just before the finish I was on her heels. She crossed first but not by much. I collapsed to the ground trying to get as much air into my lungs as possible. I was wet with sweat and more sweat was pouring from my pores to try and cool my overheated body.

“Well if I was judging by just the effort today Storme would be the winner,” Callem said. “But Gareth you finished first by seven seconds so you can take off from tomorrow’s hand-to-hand training.”

Gareth was breathing heavily but still standing and responded, “If Storme gave the best effort then he deserves to get it off. Can I give him the reward?” I was on my back trying to get oxygen into my lungs, wheezing. I saw Cilia bent over breathing heavily too but she did eye Gareth and looked to see Callem’s response.

“Yes, that is doable. Any winners in the future are free to give their rewards to someone else.” Callem said with finality. Well, it appeared I was back in Gareth’s good graces at least. He smiled at me and gave me a thumbs up which took some effort on my part to return.

Sword forms went by quickly and I was happy to get to studying my spell again but my mind kept going to ice cream. I hoped the herbalist had the vanilla beans I had asked Wynna to get. The heavy cream and milk should be easy to get for Wynna. Wynna did return a while later with Ennet helping her carry a bunch of packages. While the girls went and opened everything up that Wynna had gotten for Aelyn I went to the groceries. Yes! She had gotten everything I needed to try my hand at ice cream.

I had made it from scratch a few times in my past life, it was just going to be about getting it cold enough. For the remainder of my free time, I went and prepared the ice cream. If it worked I could make chocolate ice cream and then chocolate milkshakes! Cheeseburgers, fries, and a chocolate milkshake. I was drooling just thinking about my favorite meal of indulgence.

I had the mixture chilling and stirred it at intervals while I made dinner. The bacon cheeseburger sliders were a huge hit but when Leda mentioned that a restaurant owner in the capital had invented them Gareth let out a huge laugh and said that was a lie, Storme had been making them months before the guy had claimed credit. This got everyone to stare at me. When I didn’t say anything Gareth said, “Tell them Storme, you invented cheeseburgers.” Gareth was looking at me and I knew that look, it was ‘back me up brother’.

“Yes, I was the first person in Skyholme to make cheeseburgers,” I said confirming Gareth’s proclamation.

Cilia asked the next question, “How are you such a good cook? Do you have a high affinity for the cooking skill?” All eyes were on me and I saw Gareth was about to answer her. Not wanting my past life knowledge to be revealed accidentally by Gareth’s big mouth I responded to her.

“Something like that Cilia. I like food and making it taste good is a bit of a passion of mine.” I said. “I even have a special treat for everyone tonight after lessons. I just like making food not talking about it.” I grabbed two more sliders leaving just ten left. This caused everyone to reach for the remainder before they were all gone. That thankfully killed the conversation thread. Ennet did mention that if I was ever in Hen's Hollow she would pay for me to come and cook for her and give me free readings in addition. I don't think the woman in her 40s was implying any innuendo with her request but Aelyn did sharply eye the woman after the comment.

The lesson tonight was reviewing currency in the low lands. We talked about coins and aether crystals. Generally, all nations used metal coins but aether crystals were recognized as a hard currency, universal in all kingdoms. The dungeon crystals were a lot more prominent in the lowlands. In Skyholme they were a controlled material to feed the Triumvirate’s war machine and control the populace according to Callem and Wynna. As the conversation petered out I went and retrieved the ice cream from the freezer box and stirred it.

It was a little soft but looked ok. I spooned the dessert out into the bowls and passed it around and it was as big a hit as I was hoping. I think Cilia actually smiled at the taste but quickly hid her happiness. Gareth ate his portion so fast he got brain freeze by the contorted look on his face. He probably had thought he could get seconds if he finished quickly but alas there was no more. I had to figure out how to get chocolate next. *Sweets and Treats* in the city was the only place I knew that had it and it was expensive. Hopefully, Callem would let me spend coins freely soon.

We all headed back to the bunkhouse except Aelyn. She was going to get her reading from Wynna and Ennet tonight.

Back in the bunkhouse I climbed into my bed and found Gareth’s clothes and bed linens didn’t smell that great. I put my head at the far end of my bed and tried to focus on my practice and studying. As it got later in the evening Gareth climbed up to the loft and started talking. I tried to multitask studying and holding a conversation with Gareth. It was hard and I didn’t get much studying done before Gareth’s heavy breathing started. Well, at least I would get some studying time back tomorrow during my time off from hand-to-hand combat. Aelyn returned much later that night from her reading. She didn’t say anything, just climbed up to her loft and went under her covers, and turned off her aether light.

The next few days had us all working extremely hard. Aelyn’s new wardrobe made her extremely happy and she didn’t seem to mind having a loft to herself. I, on the other hand, was wishing Aelyn was my bunk mate over Gareth. I had made some beeswax ear plugs but they didn’t help as his breathing actually vibrated the entire loft. If his breathing eventually became snoring I would have to sleep outside.

Cilia was opening up more as well, talking to us a little more each day. My extensive use of my healing spell had it close to level 5 already. My cleanliness spell had hit levels 6 and 7 from me spamming it at night to combat the odors from Gareth’s side of the loft. The evolution ended up being a small range extension, not what I had wanted but the cleaning aura now extended about 18 inches (45 cm) from me. I needed to do some focusing exercises described in the texts Sebastian gave me in order to control my spell evolutions. This was not the first time I had the wrong desired spell evolution. This failure caused me to start to investigate the textbooks that Sebastian had given me.

The first text I read was the aether core book, Understanding Your Aether Core, A Newly Awakened Guide. It was much longer than the book I already had from Wigand's and contained a lot more detailed information, and I found a handful of ways to better perform my aether core exercises.

I had next read the spell imprinting text, Spell Imprinting, A New Mage's Guide, and it was ten times better than my old book. I was a bit upset with myself for not reading them immediately when Sebastian had given them to me. I was now pretty sure I could imprint a tier 1 spell in less than a week of hard study after what I learned from the text.

The third book I read was advancing, leveling and evolving spells. It was called Spellcraft, Leveling and Evolving Your Spells. This book said casting spells under duress and in times of need advanced them quicker as it 'stimulated' your spell matrix to a greater extent. Combat was mentioned as the best way to expedite advancement. It had numerous ways to check on a spells progress so you could prepare for evolutions as well. I was kicking myself and I read the text twice to make sure the information would stick.

I sorted the other eight books into two stacks. One pile was the books I planned to read and the rest were books I would hold off on. The pile I planned to read contained four books; Methodology to Expanding Your Aether Matrix, Utilizing Your Spell Skill Affinity, Defensive Against Magical Arts, and Utilizing Aether Crystals to Recharge Your Aether Core. The other pile had Understanding Your Responsibilities as a Mage of Skyholme, How to Choose the Best Spells to Complete Your Aether Matrix, Supportive Magics and Using Aether Items, and Introduction to Progressive Magical Theory.

It had been eight hard days of training for us and we were all dragging from fatigue. I noticed we had all greatly improved. I was shocked when Callem said during lunch we would have tomorrow off. An entire day free of training. He even said no one was allowed to even stretch!

Cilia and Leda planned to spend their off day going on a picnic lunch which they asked me to make for them. I turned them down to their disappointment. Gareth planned to spend his day soaking in the stream as he had had limited time over the last eight days to use the spot due to the woman monopolizing it. He invited me and I was tempted but told him I needed to learn my *obfuscate* spell. Aelyn said she just wanted to sleep in. That was how I found myself in my bunk working on my spell and I didn’t notice Aelyn climbing the ladder until her head popped up.

She moved into the loft and sat next to me on my bunk and pulled out a sheet of folded paper and handed it to me. “My reading from Wynna and Ennet. I want you to read it.” I took the paper and unfolded it and looked at it. The script was deep red from the dried blood used in the reading like mine had been. “They are excellent readers,” Aelyn added. “I wasn’t aware of my traits, skill affinities, and the size of my aether core and matrix.”

Abilities

Read Thoughts, Tier 2

Nimbleness, Tier 1

Duelist, Tier 1

Enhanced Mobility, Tier 1

Traits

Improved Sight, Tier 1

Long-lived, Tier 2

Skill Affinities

Acrobatics, Tier 3

Long Bow, Tier 2

Aether Matrix

Current 3

Maximum 6

Aether Core

Current 6

Maximum 19

There was nothing really unexpected as I read down her list. “It is impressive Aelyn.” If this was a move by her to try to learn my secrets, it wouldn’t work. Well, she already new most of my secrets. She smiled and it made her face very beautiful.

Aelyn spoke, “I am above average in terms of abilities. I showed you because I wanted your help.” Her big blue eyes locked to mine and I could see her pleading to me in the depths. How could anyone resist that?

“What can I help you with?” I asked tentatively.

Aelyn hesitated for a second, “I want to get stronger and use my magic," she said. "I mean Callem is making me a much stronger fighter but my potential magic…Can you teach me magic?”

I looked at her sheet again. Studying the sheet intently I spoke to Aelyn, “Your aether core is currently 6…I don’t know what that means in terms of size or amount of actual aether but your maximum size is 19 so you should work on that. Your matrix is small so selecting the right spells to imprint will be important.” I reached around her and pulled the newer text I had recently read regarding aether core exercises. “Here is the first book you should work on. Focus on learning all the exercises within to expand your aether core.” She paged through the book for a little while and I watched her. “If you have questions just ask,” I added before returning to my own studies.

Aelyn started focusing on the book. She pulled her legs under her to sit Indian style and made herself comfortable next to me. Here position mirrored mine with both of us on my bed with our backs to the wall and heads just below the long shelf. Couldn’t she study over in her loft? And wasn’t she a little too close? I mean our knees were touching. I shuffled a little away from her, turned 90 degrees, and said, “You should also think about what spells you want to learn. You can learn three tier 1 spells. You should select spells to either increase your strengths or fortify your weaknesses.”

Aelyn turned her sitting position to face me and moved closer, both her knees touching mine. “What do you suggest?”

“I would focus on your strengths Aelyn. Three spells, one to hide your mind reading ability…so you can learn the *obfuscate* ability spell I already have. For your other two spells? Maybe the dimensional pocket spell to store things you need. The last one maybe a defensive or escape spell.” She nodded as if I was bestowing some sage wisdom on her.

Aelyn started in on her book again without repositioning herself. I decided to ignore her and just studied my own book not moving. I noticed she smelled a bit earthy and sweaty, not unpleasant, but I tried to cast my extended-range *cleanliness* spell onto her. It didn’t work. Sentient and sentient beings had an aura that extended a few inches from their skin to prevent simple spells from violating the space. I would need two evolutions of the *cleanliness* spell to break that barrier and another to extend the range of the spell to completely encompass another person. Oh well, I returned to my own studying and could feel myself making progress.

Cilia and Leda barged in a few hours later. Aelyn and I had not moved from the loft. They both looked up surprised to see us in my bed facing each other, extremely close. My back was stiff but I just waved awkwardly to them. Cilia had a dark expression and Leda’s wore a face of curiosity. Gareth soon followed them in and his expression was of abhorrent shock. It wasn’t like we were kissing although we were definitely close enough to be doing so…maybe that is what they thought?

I didn’t have time for this so I moved off my bed and found I was extremely stiff from sitting still for so long. I went down the ladder and into the basement for some food. I figured I would cook an earlier dinner for everyone so I gathered ingredients for mac ‘n’ cheese and seared garlic and pepper steaks. While I was cooking Aelyn had made herself at home in my bed, stretching out and continuing to study the book. This left Gareth with nowhere to go as Cilia and Leda had plopped themselves into the only two comfy chairs. He tried to help me make dinner so I sent him to Callem’s larder for the red juice.

It got me thinking about Aelyn’s game. She was claiming me in front of the other two women, right? That was her purpose for being in my bed when the others had returned. Her being in my bed in my loft was her way of saying this one is mine, hands off? It did make me feel special if that really was her intention but as in my last life, I never understood women, and when I assumed anything I was usually wrong.

Dinner was a hit with everyone and it also got Aelyn down from my loft. Leda had mentioned that she had made real progress on the *cleanliness* spell today which reminded me that I had borrowed some enchanting primers from her. After dinner, I decided I should at least read them. So while everyone was cleaning up I went to my loft and spread out on my bed leaving no space for anyone else and grabbed the three primer books. I ignored everyone’s conversation below and focused. I noted happily that at least Gareth was being allowed into the conversation of the three young women.

The enchanting primer books were fascinating and I realized that I could use my metal shaping skill extremely effectively to produce these simple enchantment runes. With the cold runes, I could possibly make a great ice cream churn bucket. I started sketching out my ideas on some paper, where to put the runes, and how to set up the controls for the runes. There were two ways to power a runic device, channel aether to it or embed an aether crystal to power it. When you channeled aether into it the aetheric dust embedded in the silver it remained active for a period before it fizzled out. I was puzzling things out late into the night when I fell asleep not realizing Gareth had been asleep for quite some time already.