**Chapter 6 Unplanned Paths and Limits**

Butt naked and lying face down, I was awoken by a pounding on the small door to my room. I moaned a little. My head, shoulder, thigh, back, feet, and chest hurt. The aether core heartburn was working full time as well. I was going to get back at those city bastards. The knocking continued, and I rolled over to see Gareth in my doorway, pounding on the open door. “You look like a sow after the breeding season,” he said with real concern in his voice. I stood, and the bruises were evident, and Gareth’s expression turned to anger. “Who did this?” he demanded.

“Gareth, my friend, it was my fault for being careless,” I confessed. “We will get revenge, but in the future. It was one of the groups of kids from the city, and I got their names with my assessment ability. I couldn’t find you last night, so I did the soap run to the city myself,” he nodded slowly, putting the pieces together in his mind.

“They tried to shake me down on the road back to town. I created a short sword,” I paused. “I must have dropped it when I got the rock to the head. The group took off after throwing some fist-sized rocks at me. The only real damage is the one that glanced up to my head.” I rubbed the massive bump above my right ear. The dried blood wasn’t evident to Gareth with my dark black hair until I pointed it out.

I pulled on some cleaner clothes while Gareth fumed, probably planning some type of revenge. “We have bigger fish to fry,” I said, now dressed and trying to downplay the situation. Gareth had gotten himself into trouble a few times defending me. I noticed the food I had picked up last night, and my stomach reminded me I hadn’t addressed its needs. The olive paste bread wasn’t so good after sitting so long. The carrots were now mushy. Gareth took one of the jerky sticks and quickly chewed it down.

“I’m going to the bathhouse this morning. You can grab some coins from my stash for the sheaths and handles. I gave Master Aldrich a deposit.” I was still a little fuzzy and could not remember how much. “Get us some new matching belts to go with the sheaths,” I added. I started reaching for the remaining jerky, but Gareth swiped it before my hand got halfway. While munching on the jerky, he walked to the wallboard where I stashed my coins, popped it off with a solid strike, and took out two rolls of coins.

“I will see you at the bathhouse after I stop by Master Aldrich. I could use a hot soak myself,” he said as he smelled his armpits. I had just planned on getting a cold shower, but a warm bath might be good for these aches. “I will also stop by the apothecary for a salve for your bruises.” He paused and grabbed a few silver I had in my stash before replacing the wood panel cover. We had worked hard to save some coins, and Gareth was already acting like we were nobles with unlimited coins.

“Spend frugally, Gareth, and barter, for goodness’ sake! Master Aldrich is already suspicious. I devised a plan for laundering our coins in the city. While I was at Wigand’s bookshop yesterday, I spun a tale I was getting a book for a benefactor from the lowlands who was visiting Skyholme. He seemed to buy it, and I think it should be a good cover for us in the city,” Gareth nodded, swallowing the last of the jerky.

“Laundering. I thought we were going to age the coins, get them dirty?” My past life idioms kept entering my speech, and Gareth could usually puzzle them out, but when he didn’t, I had to explain. So I had to take a moment to explain the concept to Gareth.

“Laundering means obfuscating the origins of the coins. We are going to make people think our new fictional patron is supplying us with coins to buy her things. Oh yeah, the patron is a woman from the lowlands,” I struggled to remember what I told Wigand yesterday, but my head was throbbing. “I think I said she was not a dungeon diver or adventurer, just a merchant visiting Skyholme. We can flesh out her background together later.” At least that idiom Gareth was familiar with.

“Yeah, my best idea was saying we found a cache of buried treasure,” Gareth responded, “but that might be limited. How many times can you say ‘we found buried treasure’ before people start following you every minute of the day?” Gareth turned and paused in his movement, obviously thinking. “I will bring you some breakfast from the pub as well,” he said, probably feeling guilty about eating my jerky well after the fact. “Go get cleaned up.” He left, and I heard the front door close, and shortly another door opened in the house.

Was it Pascal or Freya? Based on the time, my mother and father would be off to work by now. I had given Freya the larger bedroom. Well, Pascal got the biggest bedroom after my parents. We only had three sleeping rooms in the house, and my bedroom had actually been a writing and reading room. It had been big enough for a desk, chest, and one wall of shelves. It also had a large window that Freya’s did not. Most importantly, it was on the other side of the house from the three bedrooms. I had snuck out numerous times to rendezvous with Gareth.

In the room, I had been able to squeeze a long wide bench after removing the desk. My mother got me a great new mattress to reward me for giving the larger room to Freya. The shelves had various books, clothing that wasn’t stored in the chest, two pairs of shoes, six hats, a collection of skipping stones, six roles of twine, a roll of fishing line, a box of fishing hooks and lures, four silk handkerchiefs of varying colors, a checkers board game with pieces, three decks of cards, three sets of throwing dice, one of which was dragon bone, three flutes, one of which was an expensive mahogany from a dungeon reward…or so said the man I bought it from, three empty glass flasks, twenty-eight carved figurines of various beasts and a wooden box with an assortment of steel and copper coins. My real horde was in the secret compartment in the wall.

The mahogany flute was worth at least a full gold and was the one I practiced on. I was terrible at playing it, but I could get a rhythm going for a song. I hated singing, so supplying the tune was much preferred. Almost everything was trophies from work Gareth and I had done for the townspeople. I loved the dragon bone dice as they had been lucky for me when Gareth and I diced against each other. I also had made a GO board, but that was at Gareth’s house. I also commissioned a chessboard but ended up selling it for 30 silver after Gareth didn’t like playing because I beat him so soundly every time. Getting six times my investment back had made the sale worth it.

I noticed Freya was in my doorway. She looked at me with a focus I had never seen on her face before. “Father said to let you sleep. I told them you cleaned the barn yesterday and were tired. Also, last night at dinner, Pascal convinced father to bring him to Captain Callem’s farm for a sword lesson. Father said I should check to see if you and Gareth wanted to come. Pascal was sour on that idea, but father told me to ask you directly.” Freya had spoken with poise and clarity, not like her. Something was up. Was she angry with me for not letting her hang out with us yesterday?

I remembered who Captain Callem was. He was an old naval officer who had retired to our island, Titan’s Shield. He had a small farm outside of town. He had been a marine and an arms master, I think. The title of ‘arms master’ meant he had achieved mastery over at least five different weapons. He had taught and mentored my father and uncle in the sword and bow when they were in their first year of the academy in Hen’s Hollow. Father had mentioned that Callem had a sizable pension from the navy, and his small tobacco farm made him a good amount of coin on top of that. Supposedly his tobacco had a unique magical effect and was very expensive.

I had never planned to fight in my reincarnation. I planned to live a slothful and hedonistic lifestyle once my abilities awakened. Now after my encounter yesterday, I wasn’t so sure. I should at least be able to defend myself, right?

“When are they going?” I asked. Freya had a look of surprise materialize on her face. Well, I had made it known many times I had no interest in the sword. In my past life, I wrestled in high school and continued in my first year in college. After not making the varsity in college despite winning the wrestle-off in my weight class, I quit. The coach had tried to explain his decision, but I wasn’t having any of it. I had busted my ass the summer before my freshman year of college, and then being told a senior deserved the spot because he had been on the team three years, fuck that! It was weird what I recalled from my past life. That experience had a lot of emotion tied to it.

Freya finally composed herself from the shock of my answer. “Tomorrow after breakfast. It is father’s day off. Also…” she paused, “Are you going fishing today?” I had forgotten about our normal schedule. Today I usually went to Twin Rocks with Gareth. Selling a large catch was usually good for a silver coin or two in the city. I had to think that changing our routine might be suspicious, and the blue pike was our biggest revenue generator.

“Yes, we are going fishing, but just by the river today. Are you coming?” Her face lit up, and she was already nodding emphatically. “Great. Get the poles together and wait by the barn. I’m going to the bathhouse and getting some breakfast. I will get us a packed lunch.” Our favorite fishing spot on the river was just a 10-minute walk, but we usually stayed there for a few hours. A sloping rock formation was right by the river that was very comfortable to recline on. Hopefully, none of the other local kids would be there today. The best swimming hole was just 50 yards (45 m) upstream from the spot.

Freya bolted out of the house. She returned an instant later to grab my tackle box on the shelf while wearing the biggest and brightest smile the entire time. After she had left in a whirlwind, I stood very stiffly and painfully and made my way to the bathhouse.

When I arrived, Gareth was at the bathhouse and had two meat pies, one chicken and one lamb for me. There was an empty dish behind him as well. He must have gotten breakfast for himself, probably his second breakfast. I thanked him and ate in the small lobby, scarfing down both pies and ignoring the heartburn from the aether core. He then handed me a vial with a thick white paste in it. I uncorked it and sniffed. “There should be enough for applying after the bath and tonight before bed,” Gareth said. The smell was reminiscent of lemons.

Gareth reached down to the floor to produce and unwrap a package. Pulling out two black leather belts, each with a simple sheath holding the daggers. “Master Aldrich had Antal mold white boar tusk harvested from a dungeon for the handles and wrapped them with leather stripes from a black forest rabbit. He said it would be a shame to use anything less on these fine blades.” He was grinning broadly.

More likely, Aldrich felt guilty for charging such a high sum. Well, the work was very fine as I inspected it. The belts were plain, but all of Master Aldrich’s work was of high quality and would last a very long time if properly cared for. Antal was a sort of medic in town. He had a low-tier ability that allowed him to shape bone. He could even mend a person’s broken bone if they didn’t resist his magic. It was his only ability, and he had made quite a good living. In fact, he was one of the wealthiest men in town and was responsible for most of the figurines of mystical beasts in my room.

Not that many of the 300 people in town had much wealth. The surrounding farms added another 200 people to our total population during town festivals. There were no extremely wealthy individuals in Hen’s Hollow, yet! Gareth interrupted my thoughts, “I got us the private room with the two tubs.” I walked with him to the private room and saw Gareth walking before me, trying to sneak a peek into the women’s showers as we passed. Yeah, we both did that when we visited the bathhouse, youthful curiosity.

Right now, I was in too much pain to try to get a glimpse behind the angled screens. At the right angle, you could only see a small corner of the room, and the woman who bathed in that corner was almost always older women. The younger women generally swam in the river and didn’t use the showers often.

The private room we entered had two of the largest tubs in the bathhouse and water circulating through a small magically heated stove, keeping the water hot. I stripped and quickly slid into the left tub before Edel could come in and sneak a peek. Oh my! I was in heaven as the hot water melted away the aches and pains. Gareth took the other tub. Edel briefly appeared right after we submerged and took our clothes.

After soaking for a bit, I spoke, “We are going to fish the river today.” Even with my eyes closed, I could mentally see Gareth arch his brow in question, so I answered the unasked question. “Yes, we will stick to our normal routine today. I will not make coins until tonight after I am sure my core is topped off.” It took an entire day cycle to replenish an empty core, exactly 23 hours for an untrained core. There were ways to accelerate the core’s recovery, but I hadn’t learned any of those skills yet. The books I had read on magic were general in their knowledge.

I continued, “But tomorrow, instead of instruction with your mom, we are going with Pascal and my father to Captain Callem’s for sword instruction.” I smirked, anticipating Gareth’s reaction. His tub water splashed as he sat up hastily.

Excitement laced in his voice, “You are not pulling my leg, Stormy. That would be a cruel joke if you were.” Gareth had always wanted to play with swords but followed my lead instead. He would make a fantastic warrior, but I had always pushed our path toward commerce. Fighting only increased your chances of getting injured or killed, but I had been naïve. Trouble would find me…find us. It was best to prepare to defend our interests.

“Yes, Gareth, we are going.” I looked over to see his fist pump, splashing hot water everywhere. He would be wired all day and probably not sleep tonight. When we finished scrubbing and rose from the tubs, I saw Gareth catch a glimpse of my manhood. His eyes flashed to his own. He did another back-and-forth.

I grabbed a towel and started dressing before Gareth joined me. Edel must have dropped the laundered clothes off, scented of vanilla again, my favorite. “Why don’t you take the larger dagger,” I said, handing his that belt and sheath. “I think you need to compensate.” My face was twisted in a silly grin. It took him a minute to catch on to my innuendo.

“Well, Storme, we will just have to see who needs to compensate tomorrow in sword practice,” a little force in his voice laced the dark humor in his tone. Oh shit. Yeah, Gareth was going to beat me silly tomorrow. Maybe I should save some of the lemon-scented salve. After dressing, I used the lemon-scented balm, and it immediately had a positive effect. Together we left, stopped to get some packed meals for lunch, and headed to the barn.

Freya was there, and the three of us went to the river. No one was swimming. The fishing went well—fourteen harvestable fish between us. While we fished, Freya kept asking for us to take her to the city and reminded me at least five times her birthday was approaching. But we had evolving plans, and I wouldn’t commit.

Gareth kept talking about swords. He was trying to puzzle out what specific sword he should focus on. In the end, he was torn between the saber and the scimitar. Our island produced many of the city guards throughout Skyholme, so we were all versed in melee weapons growing up, and our first year of the academy would focus on the craft.

It was a pleasant day, and the misty clouds let the sunshine through for most of the day. I napped and fished, speaking little but focusing inwards on my core. I didn’t have mage sight, but from my readings, I knew a mage’s core was like another limb. You just needed to learn how to control it. I didn’t actually make progress as I kept falling into brief naps in the grass. What I needed was a spell. Innate abilities that drew on my aether core were fine, but imprinting a spell could train me on using my core and manipulating aether.

Using our new daggers, we gutted the fish and made fillets to carry back. Gareth carried our load home in the fish bag, and we chatted about other kids in town. All of us contributed to the small gossip wheel of our tiny town.

Back home, we split the fillets, and I went to cook for my family. I made a simple garlic butter to cook the fish and had a side of saffron rice with diced sweet peppers. I had been a good cook in my last life. Recipes seemed the easiest thing for me to recall from my past life. I think this was because I took so much joy in cooking in my past life. I was able to find most of the ingredients I was familiar with in the Sphere. My family gushed over the meal, and Pascal couldn’t shut up about the trip to learn from Captain Callem tomorrow. My focus was not on the family. It was on what I would be doing in a few hours, testing my limits.

With the family asleep and certain a full day had passed since I had last drawn on my aether core, I was ready. I decided to go for it, completely draining my core and making as much gold as possible. I hadn’t made any silver yet, but I felt confident I could make gold. I focused on the manifestation and soon felt my core draining. It was like vertigo, no, fainting without actually fainting. When I knew I was tapped out, I looked at the product. A good-sized ball of gold was in my hands. I had done it!

How much gold, though? I needed a little aether to use my shaping ability, so I waited an hour while laying in bed playing with the lump. Then focusing on my shaping skill, I started to make one coin at a time. Thirteen small coins with almost enough for a fourteenth! And I knew a mage’s core would grow 10 to 20 times over puberty, according to the books I had read! I placed three of the coins in my common coin pouch and the remaining ten coins into the secret wall vault. Sleep came easy after that.