**Chapter 26 Aelyn Arrives**

Storme was happy to see Freya and Monty. Gareth had been expeditious in bringing her for their two-day stay. After dropping them off Gareth was practically running back to the city to go on his own solo adventure.

The first thing Freya mentioned was that Pascal’s 14th birthday was coming. Fourteen was the age of maturity in Skyholme. I had found that the humans within the World Sphere aged physically faster than I was accustomed to. By my best estimates, the age of 16 was closer to age 19 in terms of physical growth from the Earth I came from. So at age 14 kids in Skyholme had the raging hormones of a 16 or 17-year-old and were going into their final growth spurt. Generally, the 14th birthday was the last birthday someone celebrated with a party. My family still noted the birthdays of our parents with small gifts but the real celebration was the five-day holiday that ended and started a new year. It was like Christmas, Hannukah, New Year and Birthdays rolled into a five-day party.

Freya was pushing for me to get Pascal something nice. She said I should try to mend fences with him as he was still a bit mad and envious of me and Gareth for training with Callem. After talking with her for a bit I learned Pascal’s preferred sword was just a standard long sword so I said I would have one ready for her to bring him before I left. I would give her the sword and some coin to buy a scabbard as I wouldn’t be present for the celebration of his 14th.

We spent a few hours playing and teaching Monty new tricks. Roll over, play dead, and shake. Just simple tricks from my past life but the dog mastered them all in a short time. Freya and I then went to Callem’s house and cooked with Wynna. We made berry filling for phyllo dough and then made the phyllo dough. For a meal, we made a basic lasagna and garlic spinach for the side. Callem enjoyed the meal with us. After Freya and I went to my bunkhouse and played some board games into the night. When she finally passed out from exhaustion I got to work on Pascal’s long sword.

I got some coal and manifested the iron and made the steel and worked the steel to make as strong and durable of a blade as I could. I folded the steel again but was able to tighten the lines enough that it just shimmered instead of showing the wave pattern. I realized that I probably hadn’t even come close to exploring the depths of my shape-metal ability. It was a tier 4 ability and those abilities were extremely powerful.

I was quite impressed with the finished blade myself. I figured this was good practice for when I finally made a blade for Gareth. It still needed a handle and sheath but it was more than adequate for Pascal. Hell, it was the finest blade I had seen outside of Callem’s personal collection. He had seven remarkable blades he kept in his bedroom that he had shown us a few times and let us clean. I wrapped the blade in one of my blankets and put it aside for Freya to bring back. I focused on my aether core exercises for a bit before repeatedly casting my *cleanliness* spell. I knew I would be getting new spells soon and I was hoping to get the spell to level 7 for a new evolution. The spell still hadn’t reached level 6 yet so I was pushing it. I fell asleep with the smell of vanilla filling the room.

The next day Freya and I had a simple breakfast of diced ham mixed into scrambled eggs topped with shredded cheese. It was my go-to easy but tasty and filling breakfast. Monty seemed to really like the dish as well. After lunch, Callem and Wynna would be taking Freya back home so I let her decide what to do for the rest of the morning. She wanted to see my sword skills. The little brat, this was my day off! Callem just smiled as Freya repeated her request to see her brother’s sword mastery. I was hardly a master.

In the practice yard, I did my stretches and instead of the sword, I decided on a staff demonstration. It was a little more flashy and I was actually more comfortable with that as a weapon. After my demonstration, Callem grabbed a staff and we engaged in a few friendly bouts. So as not to embarrass me too much in front of my sister Callem let me show off my prowess without giving me too many bumps and bruises. Freya for her part clapped at my effort and Monty barked and needed to be restrained a bit as he didn’t like Callem hitting me…or maybe he just wanted to play with the big sticks?

Lunch finally came and I was super dirty and sweaty. I healed myself and used my cleanliness spell. Callem asked for healing which surprised me. I had injured him? Then he showed me his injury and I nearly fell over. He had gotten a big ass splinter when his practice staff had cracked a little from hitting me. As I was walking Freya to lunch she asked me, “Was that magic? Cleaning yourself instantly and healing the welts on your skin?”

“Yes Freya,” I told her. “I can do a little magic now. Nothing extraordinary just some simple healing and a cleaning trick.”

“Can you use magic on me? I can't wait to tell Gwen my brother is a mage!” She was excited.

“Oh no! It is a secret and I can't really do much other than heal you.” She had a scrap on her forearm and I quickly healed it. I also removed some small scars on her hands and arms.

“Storme you need to tell mother and father. They would be so proud! Healers are held in such high regard! I bet you can marry into a noble house with your skills!” Freya’s mind was going down a road I didn’t want to travel. It took time to calm her down and we had some nice finger sandwiches that Wynna made for lunch. After getting her to promise to keep my secret she left with Callem and Wynna for the town. I gave her the wrapped sword for Pascal and 20 large silver coins to get a quality hilt and scabbard. After they left it took me a second to realize I was alone!

I went swimming in the buff, wallowing in the cool water. Then tidied up my loft. I used my *cleanliness* spell to make sure all my sets of clothes were clean as well as my spare blankets and pillows. I had a lot of pillows and had gotten comfortable enough in training I didn’t need them all anymore. Each loft had two beds that were head to head and a large closet armoire built into the walls at the ends of the beds. Under the beds were three medium chests to store possessions. On the wall over each bed was a full-length shelf. Like Gareth, I had spread my belongings to the other bed in my loft but thought it was time to contain my things. We were having guests in a few months and Gareth would have to move to my loft or vice versa. I neatly packed my loose belongings in one of the chests under my bed.

Laying in a clean and organized loft I started reading my aether core book and practicing when I heard Callem and Wynna return. I could hear them talking as they returned and heard their door open and shut. Gareth should be returning soon as well. The transport skyship should land around dinner time and then it would take him 40 minutes or so of walking time to get back to the farm.

I went and ate dinner with Callem and Wynna, some fabulous crusty cheesy bread and smoked ham they had gotten in town with some apple cider. The apple cider was an import from another island and was extremely good but a little thick for cider with its pulpy texture and slight fermentation. I returned to my loft and had trouble studying. I was anticipating that Gareth had found me some remarkable spells.

My eyes perked as I heard Gareth loudly arguing with a female voice I didn’t recognize. I couldn’t make out the words yet but both parties were not happy with each other. I rushed down my ladder and outside to see Gareth coming out of the trees with a tall young woman who was extremely attractive. Many things went through my mind, did he kidnap her? Did he somehow get roped into marriage while in the capital? Did she kidnap him? The last was because of the tongue-lashing she was giving Gareth. Callem and Wynna were also outside watching the procession.

As they got closer I could see a large mark on the side of the young woman’s neck. I had moved to stand next to Callem and Wynna and it was Wynna who spoke first among us and he tone was angry, and I mean **mother ready to beat her kids angry**, “Gareth I thought you were much better than this! How could you do something so foul and unjust!” Before Gareth could respond she stormed away into the house and slammed the door behind her. I was trying to puzzle out what was going on.

Callem spoke next and his tone was hard as well but not angry, “Gareth get into the house and you can explain yourself. Storme join us as I am sure you played some role in this travesty.” What, me? I just wanted books! At least I could be happy to see the young woman was carrying a large strapped white bundle that was very square…maybe four spell books? “Inside, NOW!” Callem yelled, breaking his cold calm. “You as well girl!” His command voice had all three of us scrambling inside.

We were all seated on different couches surrounding the large square coffee table. Wynna was not there but I was sure she had her ear to the door. “So, Gareth,” Callem began in a very gruff and aggrieved voice, “It seems you have taken on an indenture contract. What possessed you to do so? And where did you get the funds?” I connected the dots as Callem spoke. The large tattoo on the young woman’s neck must be the mark of the indentured. We hadn’t been told that in our lessons. “Well!?” Callem’s patience was wearing thin at Gareth’s silence.

“I…I thought I was doing something good.” He squeaked out. “I wanted to free her. I didn’t know she couldn’t be released from the bond.” Callem’s eyes at least softened slightly as his gaze went to the young woman.

“And you girl, your name? And what great evil have you committed that has gotten you a life bond?” The girl was on her guard and not at all as animated as she had been when I had first seen her verbally laying into Callem.

“My name is Aelyn, Aelyn Imiduis. I committed no atrocity!” Her voice had grown a spine as she spoke. “You people are the wicked ones. We came here with the carnival and were ripped from it on the last day proclaiming we were spies and saboteurs!” I could see she was holding back tears. My god Gareth, what fucking mess had you gotten yourself into? “This oaf over there,” she pointed at Gareth, “bought my contract and took me. I don’t care what he paid, 50 or 100 platinum! I will break this evil mark and free myself!”

I was processing what she had said. Did she say Gareth had spent 100 platinum to get her contract? To my shame, I only thought of how few and meager spells the remaining 11 platinum could have purchased. But Callem brought up a point I had overlooked and yelled, “How in Demon’s spawn pits did you get 100 platinum boy!” Surprise, anger, and worry were lacing his words. My thought was Gareth had just fucked us both.

Gareth was stumbling and gasping, not finding the words, and then made eye contact with me. He wanted me to bail him out. He wasn’t going to break our promise. Come on Gareth, you had a simple mission, get to the capital, get clothes, buy spells and return. Well if I couldn’t trust Callem then I couldn’t trust anyone really. I spoke, “They were my coins. I gave him 111 platinum to go to the capital and purchase a few spells for me.” All eyes were now locked on me and I heard the door open behind me, Wynna had entered the room. Callem’s jaw was briefly unhinged, Gareth had relief on his face and Aelyn had a mild shock, and for the first time since arriving she was actually studying me as if noticing me for the first time.

Callem regained his composure first, “And where did you find so many coins Storme?” At least his voice was not hard and interrogating like it was with Gareth.

I squeaked out my response, “I made them.”

I heard Wynna rushing into the circle of couches, “Oh Storme! How could you! When they find out the coins are not real…well they probably already have…how much did you spend Gareth? I have savings and should be able to cover…oh boys this is a fine mess but we will get through it and you will learn from your mistakes.” She sounded concerned and motherly. We had definitely grown on her in the last few months.

“Wynna the coins are real…well at least the platinum is real. I can turn my aether into metal.” To illustrate my point I created a steady stream of small gold coins rolling out onto the coffee table until my aether almost bottomed out. I had gotten really good at combining my abilities and it was actually fun to show them off even under the current circumstances.

The next few minutes had Wynna, Callem and Aelyn examining the coins while Gareth looked relieved the attention was off him. I gave him a look that said ‘don’t get comfortable Gareth, me and you will be having words after this!’

Wynna asked a few questions about my ability, “How many coins I could make? What metals? How long they lasted? Where else had I used the coinage?” Callem still had disbelief on his face and Aelyn was now dressing me down with a hungry stare that made me very uncomfortable.

After answering Wynna’s questions it was Aelyn that spoke next, “Since they were this boy’s coins he is the owner of my contract Gareth. Give him the ring.” I didn’t realize what this meant but Gareth took a ring out of his pocket and tossed it at me like a hot potato.

“I don’t want your contract, you are free!” I yelped dropping the ring like it was hot. Wynna was now seated next to me and picked up the ring and briefly studied it before putting it on the table.

“Storme,” Wynna said. “The magic binding her to the contract is quite strong, tier 4 I’m guessing.”

Gareth interrupted with, “Tier 5 actually.” This didn't help his case as Callem and Wynna gave him a stare that caused him to shrink into the couch.

Wynna winced at the new information. “The mark on her neck is permanent, it can only be removed by the mage who cast it or a tier 6 spell that can overpower the magics in the mark. No one in Skyholme can help her. In the low lands there are mages strong enough," she paused, "Have you worn the ring Gareth?” He violently shook his head no. “So this ring is tied to her mark. She must obey the wearer.”

“And the longer I go without someone wearing the ring the more the mark burns me. Three days without a wearer and I would be incapacitated with pain.” Aelyn supplied. This got a pitying look from Wynna and made Gareth shrink even further.

“You or Callem should wear the ring then!” I voiced loudly, “Or Aelyn can wear it herself, yes let’s do that!”

Wynna at least seemed thoughtful and Callem was still processing that I could make coins out of thin air but it was Aelyn that spoke, “No, if you are all giving me a choice I want him to wear it!” Her finger pointing at me didn’t make me feel any better. “If I put the ring on it would just accelerate the burning pain. The ring can only attune to one person. If that person dies I have to bring the ring back to the archmage that linked it to my tattoo to reset it. That way they can sell me again.”

“Ok wait a second. What if I just learn a tier 6 spell and free her of the tattoo?” It was Callem who laughed at my suggestion first, followed by Wynna and Aelyn. Gareth chuckled not getting the joke. I definitely didn't get it.

“Tier 6 magic Storme?” Wynna said. “First finding a spell capable of breaking the mark and removing it, then imprinting that spell? Archmages struggle to imprint tier 4 spells due to their complexity. Maybe in 50 years, you might have the capacity to do so…” She trailed off.

“Storme put on the ring,” Callem said, the matter apparently decided. “Aelyn has chosen you for now and I trust you will not abuse her trust and will work to free her of her bond.” I reluctantly took the ring from the table and slid it on. It sent tingles through me and almost immediately I was aware of where Aelyn was. “Make sure she promises to never reveal your secrets Storme. Now Storme let's talk about the bigger problem. Your coins.”

I had to tell Callem everything. Everything I had used my aether created coins on since I had started making them. Wynna had started taking notes as I spoke and this process made me uncomfortable. It was a story highlighting my decision-making processes. Callem did not look amused when I finished.

“If anyone asks Storme you got the coins from me. The same goes for you Gareth. And give me all your remaining coins.” Gareth slowly produced and handed over his money pouch. Callem emptied it and mixed them with the gold coins I had made earlier. Callem picked up one of the remaining platinum coins and studied it. “Shiny,” was the extent of his appraisal. He looked at a few more coins before returning to look at me. “Don’t make any more platinum coins.” It was not a request. But I took it as permission that is was ok to still make gold coins. I nodded in acquiescence. “I need to think more on this with Wynna. Storme you will take Aelyn to the bunk room and get her settled in. Gareth I still have some words for you so you can remain for now.”

I got up and left the hot seat. How was I feeling like a kid who had their hand caught in the cookie jar? I was just using my abilities to beat the system. That was why I had chosen the abilities I had! Aelyn followed me with the white square package. Well, at least I could see what spells Gareth had obtained for me. In the bunkhouse and told Aelyn about the larder below and the two lofts. I told her Gareth would move his things to my side but she nixed that. She said she would be fine sleeping in the bed adjacent to mine in my loft. I got the uncomfortable feeling she had something planned for me or at least planned to use me somehow.

The other bed in my loft just had a lot of pillows on it which made me a little embarrassed. I told her they were so I could find a comfortable position to sleep in after a hard day's training. I got her some blankets from one of the chests under the bed and took the white package from her. Aelyn made her bed and was trying to be busy organizing her space but since she didn't own anything it was mostly arranging the pillows. I would need to get a partition for the beds as they butted against each other.

I told Aelyn where the stream was so she could bathe if she wanted to and gave her some of my clothes to change into after. I also gave her some soap and a towel that I had and really didn’t need. As per Callem’s advice, I asked Aelyn to never reveal my secrets or do anything to harm me. She confirmed the order with an all-too-sexy smile. Yep, she had plans for me. Thankfully she left to go bath.

My excitement over new spells had been thoroughly quashed by the incident but I unwrapped the package anyway and looked at the receipt. The *obfuscate* spell! The most important spell by far and at least Gareth had obtained it. *Ranged heal*? I found the spell tome and opened it and started reading the spell synopsis. It was a tier 4 spell that was fairly powerful and filled my need for repairing the bone structure. The aether cost was steady out to about 10 feet (3m) and then increased quickly the further away. So not an all-powerful healing spell for long ranges but it did a much better job healing than my current basic mend flesh spell even with the higher aether cost it would be very useful.

I put the spell tome down and went to the *obfuscate* spellbook and paged through it. It was definitely the spell I would be working on next. After paging through it and getting a headache from my initial perusal of the spell forms I looked at the three lightning spells. *Lightning Sphere* and *Lightning Spear* were both tier 2 offensive spells. One of these should have been defensive, right? Maybe Gareth didn’t read the synopsis? The *lightning sphere* created a ball of contained electricity that acted as a sort of hand grenade on contact after leaving the mage’s hand. Lightning spear flung a 6’ (2m) lighting bolt at a single target. I had brief dreams of obtaining the nickname Zeus...but that name meant nothing in this realm.

Aelyn had returned and was wearing my clothes which were very baggy on her. I yelled down to her from the loft as she came through the front door, telling her she could get what she wanted from the larder and she went to the basement to do so. My final spell was *Lightning Reflexes* and I was surprised to see it was a tier 4 spell as well. The spell synopsis was quite wild. The spell essentially accelerated a mage so much that it appeared time was slowing around him. The spell had a component to stabilize and strengthen the mage’s organs and skeletal frame to prevent him from being ripped apart. The spell did have issues in that it required a lot of aether to maintain. Hopefully, with my aether pool, it wouldn’t be a hindrance. I still wasn’t sure which spell I should learn after the *obfuscate* spell though.

Aelyn had returned and climbed up to the loft and handed me a jug of pear juice and a sloppily made sandwich from sliced beef, tomato, and a garlic spread. “No eating in the loft," was all I said as I returned to the spell books ignoring the young woman. It was a rule me and Gareth had to keep bugs and mice out of the sleeping area. I think she was upset but I couldn’t focus on her right now. I was engrossed in the *obfuscate* spell book. Aelyn returned to the loft a little later and slipped into her bed. She was obviously exhausted as when I finally looked up she was sleeping.

Gareth entered a short while later and looking down on him he looked like a beaten man. He had his pride, ego, intellect, and our trust greatly thrashed in the last few hours. I gave him a bone, “Nice job on the spell selections Gareth. They are all extremely useful.” He perked up at that. He started eating the sandwich that Aelyn had made for me and drank the juice as well. Well, I could do without food tonight. Soon Gareth was up on his side of the loft and in his bed.

“Did she decide to sleep over there or did you tell her to?” Gareth asked hesitantly.

“What Aelyn? Yeah, she just choose this side. I think she is asleep so we should be quiet.” I responded as I used my light stone to read. I planned to put out my own aether light in just a few minutes.

“Storme?” Gareth whispered loudly.

“Yeah?” I responded.

“I’m sorry I screwed this all up.” His low voice was hurt and ashamed. After a long pause, he said, “I did get you a nice present, a new coat.” After another long pause, “And some new underwear which are pretty awesome.” He didn’t say much after that and his heavy breathing that signaled he was asleep soon started. I closed my book put out the aether light and went to sleep myself.