Chapter 60 (Arc 2 Chapter 14)

When we disembarked, I could see my large warehouse.  The damaged sections had been completely repaired.  I paused. The color of the stone was not very attractive, gray with splotches of black.  “Is the painter going to meet us?”  I asked Isla.  She paused next to me.

“Yes, he should be inside now.  A few panels that he requested have arrived, and I think he is anxious to get started,” she said, confused as to what I was looking at.

“Good, I will wait here.  Go and bring him up to the platform,” I said, settling in.  She looked about to question me or object but held her tongue and nodded.

The landing platforms for the skyships were about 20’ in height.  My warehouse had a large plaza about 150 feet in width between it and the platforms.  It gave the side of my warehouse a very flat stone canvas for something. The right side, from my viewpoint, would have windows installed as the renovations started but the left side.... It was the perfect place for a billboard.  Maybe not a conventional one.  But a 100’ long and 40’ high mural would be something.  My imagination was running wild as Isla returned and introduced me to the painter.

“Tatem Inkshear,” he bowed.  I remembered him when he had sold me the plates.  The man was middle-aged and looked slightly nervous.  Maybe he thought I had changed my mind.

“So you won’t have any issues with the 14’ high paintings?”  I asked, and he quickly affirmed they were not an issue.  “I want the entire exterior of the warehouse painted white.  But the left half, I indicated, I want a massive mural 100’ long and 40’ high.”  His eyes popped.

“I...that....it is possible....what do you want the mural to be of?” he asked, dazed, and he was now also starting at the warehouse.

“I think a dungeon-delving team fighting a twelve-headed hydra,” I looked at him as he processed my request. The hydra had been my favorite plate. I was a ten-headed hydra, and each head was doing something different.

“So the entire left third....” he mumbled to himself.

“Tatem, you can hire other painters for the unimportant parts. The detail of the hydra and adventurers is what is important,” I said.  “We also need the name of the restaurant clearly written on the right side somewhere in massive script.  *The Shiny Platinum*.”  I finished and waited on him.

“I need the stone made flat.  I think the mage working inside could use his skill to flatten and harden the stone to a polished finish,” he was nodding to himself. “Maybe five months with help....” he guessed on how long it would take. I looked at Isla, who had a stunned look.

“I can talk with the build team and the mage....” she was paging through her folio.  She looked at the side of the warehouse and then the paper.  “I think the mage would charge around 80 gold to refinish the left side of the wall and prep it for Tatem,” she finally answered.

“The whole warehouse.  Not just where the painting will be.  Could the mage do it in white stone?  That way we can save on painting the building white.” She scrunched her face in thought.

“I don’t think so.  The white stone would have to be quarried in a dungeon.  It would cost twice as much,” she tabulated on a piece of paper.  “Maybe 1,000 gold for the entire building, but the white stone is glossy and would add a nice aesthetic to the building.  Do you think Callem would spend so much on the exterior?”  Isla asked.

I was envisioning the change in my mind, “I will convince him.  Can you seal the hydra mural, so it doesn’t fade, Tatem?”

Brought back into the conversation, he answered quickly, “Yes, I can use permanency paints and coat it with a clear protective coat.  Just starting at the magnitude of the project...I can make the adventurers life-size....people can walk up and stand next to them....then look at the massive beast...I will do it for free.  I mean, I will do it for the cost of materials.  I have to do this,” his eagerness coated his voice.

“I’m glad to hear it.  I hope you make it your masterpiece, but please finish the 23 panels inside first.  Isla said you have sketches?” I asked, but he seemed distracted.  I could see his eyes were imaging the future mural.

“Yes,” he finally said, and we made our way inside.  A few men were bringing in wheelbarrows of stone, and a mage was casting a spell, causing the stone to melt together and flow to the ceiling to create support columns for the future structure.  The mage memorized me while at work.  I interrupted him, and he was briefly annoyed until he found out I was the one paying him.

The stone spell he was using was a tier 2 spell that he had leveled up to 16.  He had been doing construction for 11 years and had been trained in a small mage academy on another island.  He wasn’t skilled enough to work in the capital but his team was considered a top build team in Aegis city.

We talked about my idea for coating the exterior of the warehouse in a white stone that could be painted. Tatem joined the conversation as we zeroed in on the perfect stone facade for beauty and paintability.  Isla waited patiently as we finished. Then Tatem took me to a table with his sketches.

A lot of the actions and poses were similar to the plates I already had.  His memory clicked, and he remembered selling me the 69 plates.  “Isla, a woman’s input would be appreciated here,” I said, dragging her into the decision-making process.

Isla’s biggest input was changing some of the female monsters to male. So the naga and rakshasa were switched in their sexes to male and the ogre got a noticeable bulge added to his loin cloth.  We still had an array of feminine monsters; medusa, harpy, succubus, lamia and vampire.  The rest of the monsters were large beasts.  Isla was also charged with choosing where each panel would be placed on the walls.  She seemed to revel in the weight I was giving her feedback.  My excited artist, Tatem, went home to make new sketches for final approval.  I told Isla she had been privy to the conversation so she could approve the final image without me.

I spent time with Isla touring the completed section.  The warehouse/ hanger was completed, but they were still working on the massive doors.  I noticed the guards she had hired were just milling about in the corner by crates of copper bars and some furniture that had arrived already.  “So, are you going to hire a metal mage to make your copper pipes?” Isla asked as we passed the guards.

“No, I am working on imprinting a metal-shaping spell,” I said without breaking stride.

“That would be impressive.  I heard metal spells are difficult to obtain and even more difficult to learn,” her tone was filled with praise.  Looking at her she definitely had become infatuated with me.

“It will take some time, but I hope to imprint before the end of the first year academy.  It is going to make my enchanting work go faster, as well as I plan to do most of the enchanting work in this building myself,” her eyes went wide at my statement, but we moved into the area where the kitchens and ovens were going to be located.

I spent an hour feeling out the kitchens and changing the layout as Isla took notes.  When we finished we went to the merchant quarters to eat at a nice restaurant.

“So Storme, I wanted to apologize for sharing my work with Loriel.  I promise it will not happen again.  Loriel….” I stopped her.

My tone was slightly hard, “Learn to separate your friendships from your work life.  You underestimated me because I am young.  You do good work, but I can not tolerate people in my employ going behind my back.”  My tone had her cringe slightly as I had been so amicable all day.  She just nodded.

As we were eating, Isla spoke, “I….I want you to know that Loriel plans to talk with two friends of yours….Leda and Cilia.  She is planning to get them to help crew her personal skyship.   Those in line for the house seat are entitled to seven personal crew from the navy ranks.”  Her hesitation in telling me was a cue that I was perhaps swaying her away from Loriel’s camp to mine.  Or this could be a setup with both of them fabricating this scenario to get me to trust Isla more.

I hadn’t paused in my eating of the meal as she informed me.  I was acting unconcerned but was thinking if this was good for Leda and Cilia.  It would pull them out of the navy, which should make them safer.  But it was a clear attempt for Loriel to gain leverage on me.  It might seem all kosher on the surface but it was in the guise of her doing a favor for me.

I decided not to show my irritation, “Cilia always wanted to captain her own ship.  I think, given the opportunity, she would jump at it.”

Isla didn’t speak for the rest of the meal.  I paid for the meal and went into a large bookstore in the city. I wasn’t looking for spell books but for dungeon books. Gareth had a small growing collection, but if I was going to manage my own dungeon team, I needed my own references. I purchased a copy of every dungeon delving book the caretaker recommended. My particular interest was focused on the dungeon resources that could be harvested from the dungeons on the islands and the few dungeons that Skyholme controlled in the lowlands. I also added a few books on free city dungeons that were controlled by the adventurer’s guild that spanned the Sphere. Thirty-six books in total, triple the size of Graeth’s library.

We had one final appointment for the day that I was hoping would be quick so I could make the ship back to Hen’s Hollow. We were going to meet Harold Miaden, an interior designer. It was just a short walk, and he had dozens of ideas…not a single one I liked. In the end, I went with a dungeon maple for the floors, chairs, and tables with black dungeon mahogany for highlights. It was simple and affordable as both woods were easily farmed from the local dungeons. I would be lighting the spaces with my own light globes.

Harold didn’t like my ideas saying the ambiance was half the dining experience. The panels of the monsters didn’t impress him, and he wanted me to have massive curtains over them and only show them for certain occasions. In the end, I couldn’t believe I had paid this man nine gold for nothing. Isla was embarrassed as Harold had tried over and over again to get me to see things his way. As we left his offices, I told Isla to fire him. She knew what I wanted with the furniture.

I was planning to travel back to Hen’s Hollow with Isla on the only flight today to my small town, but she professed she had a number of other things to do in town. Mainly she was ordering the stoves and ovens now that she had a clear idea of what was needed. They would be of high quality so I could enchant them when I was ready.  She also had to set up a contract with the dungeon delvers and furniture guilds for the maple and mahogany furniture. That meant I was going to have to hire a porter for all my books instead of sharing the load with Isla. To keep up appearances, I had them transported in a crate to my warehouse and then secreted them to my dimensional closet, leaving an empty crate behind.

I just made the ship before it departed. I returned alone and was anxious to return to training my *lightning reflexes* spell but I needed to balance the large aether expenditure from the spell with continuing to make more platinum coins.

It was late when I got back to the barracks, and Gareth was not in his bed.  The twins door was shut and I didn’t want to knock.  My stomach roiled….jealousy….*Storme, get a grip*, I told myself.  I did what any adolescent would do in my situation.  I went out to train.

I ran through the woods toward Twin Rock lake with my *lightning reflexes* spell active in spurts.  I wanted to get accustomed to using it in short bursts to conserve aether.  Going back and forth was causing some disorientation that I was slowly becoming accustomed to.  The focus on the training quickly broke my thoughts from Mera.

Between the two rocks where the giant eagle raptor had attacked me, I rested and cast multiple alarm spells.  I pulled out my saber, ran through sword forms, and then did the same forms under the *lightning reflexes* spell.

Faster, I needed to go faster.  I hit a spell evolution and worked the spell evolution into the overdrive mode.  It was stupid to then proceed in overdrive mode with the swords forms, but it felt liberating. A 132% enhancement to my speed made me feel unstoppable.

The soreness from overdrive mode was not as bad as I had envisioned.  Oh, it hurt like I had just been forced into a pertzel with my joints being strained beyond normal but my pain tolerance was now such that I could spend a minute to spam my mend flesh spell and recover….except…. my diagnosis from the mend flesh spell indicated I had a spiral fracture on my ulna.

So I learned, in overdrive mode, the protections from the spell were limited.  Instead of returning I continued to train and reveled in the pain.  Was I becoming a masochist?  Lightning reflexes at regular intensity did protect the spiral fracture from getting worse.  With all the torque I was putting on the bone, it should have fractured further but held.

I switched to my staff and repeated my forms with the staff, soaking the pain like a drug to distract myself.   I realized it was getting close to conditioning time at the academy as I had trained through the night and into the morning. Was this how Gareth felt when he was driven?  Aelyn would be cross if I was late, so I ran back and smirked that I hadn’t dispelled my alarm spells.  Two were mental alerts for myself, but the other three I had set were my developing flash-bang variation.

I cast my *cleanliness* spell and found Aelyn just getting ready to head into the barracks and wake everyone, “Aelyn, I broke my wrist and needed to see Antal in town to repair it.”

Concern laced her voice, “Where you attacked?  What happened?  Should I go and get Callem?”

I gave a half-hearted laugh to bush off the injury, “Just training my sword forms.  Nothing too dangerous, I assure you.”  Aelyn did look quite ravishing, and her genuine concern for me was touching.  I realized that my aether burn from my core was minimal….so my libido was starting to kick in.  I was in the middle of a growth spurt as well.  I waved to her as I left the training yard and headed into town.

Gareth was coming down the road from town, “Hey, Stormy.  How did your date with Isla go?” He said, trying to bait me.

“The restaurant is coming along.  Did you not stay in the barracks last night?” I asked.

“No, I had dinner with my parents and stayed in my old room.  They are talking about adopting an orphan from the recent attacks.  Guess they miss having me around.”  He grinned.  A tingle of relief flooded me, knowing he hadn’t been in the twin’s room last night.

“Well, they certainly have a lot more free coin with not having to feed you!”  I joked, and we laughed together.  “Aelyn is in the yard waiting.  I broke my wrist and will be back shortly after I see Antal.”

Gareth looked concerned, so I added, “Just a training accident.”

He narrowed his eyes, “Either way, next time you go to Aegis city, I am coming with you as your bodyguard.” He sounded firm in his statement.  I guessed he wanted to keep an eye on me as well as do some sightseeing of his own.

“Fine.  Next time I plan to go, you can come if you can beat me a duel.”  I said with a stupid mischievous smile.  I envisioned giving Gareth a sound beating like he had done to me so many times.  He laughed it off, thinking I was making a joke.

I got my arm healed and returned to get in most of the conditioning.  At breakfast, Mera wouldn’t look me in the eyes.  Gareth had obviously told her that I knew about him sleeping in the bed with her and her sister. She looked embarrassed, and that, in turn, made me feel guilty. I had flashes from my past life of how poorly I had been in relationships and didn’t know what to say.

It was Fera who broke the silence at breakfast. “Storme, are you still going to hire Mera at your brewery?” she asked for her sister. So that is what had concerned Mera.

“Of course,” I said without hesitation. I tried to say the following in a neutral voice, “Mera, you are free to do whatever you wish. I will respect your decisions.”

Mera was crying, and I didn’t know what I had done wrong. She got up and left the table. Mia was watching the drama like an old woman watching a soap opera. Fera gave me a cross look and went after her sister. A heaved a sigh, “A lot of drama.” Gareth was shrinking in his chair as he was technically the cause of all this. I was the one who had to sort out my feelings and soothe everyone hurt by his actions.

We had spellcraft right after breakfast, and Selina gave me the spellbook for the *Thermostatic Aura* spell. It was in pristine condition, and Selina said it was just copied. Usually, older copies were better since mages would leave notes in the margins, but I was happy as a few evolutions were noted within. Mera and Fera entered the classroom, and it was clear Mera had had a good cry with her puffy eyes and red eyes.

Reluctantly the two sat at my table like usual. Aelyn wasn’t here today. She usually came to the class three or four times a week, though. I looked at Mera, who had trouble making eye contact, “Mera, I like you,” I started. “We will always be friends. Remember that.” She looked ready to cry again, but her sister calmed her, and the lesson began. I still couldn’t figure out what I was saying that was wrong.

I slid the new spell book into my dimensional space when I went to the bathroom. I planned to work on the *arcane lock* spell first and then the *aether shield* spell. After those two spells, I needed an offensive spell. Then maybe I would try my luck with either the tier 4 ranged healing spell or the tier 3 thermostatic aura spell. I just had so much work in front of me.

The week at the academy did not heal my relationship with Mera. She was angry with Gareth and in misery with me. I did not like all this teenage drama and did my best to ignore it. I saw Mia and Aelyn talking a few times, and I assumed they were having fun watching us try to navigate the speed bump in our friendship.

Every night, I went to the woods to work on my *lightning reflexes* spell advancement. The only issue was I had only made 11 light glodes to sell this week and just had 7 platinum coins in my dimensional space.

I learned the arcane lock spell on 5th day, which was a terribly useful. The first two evolutions I used were to extend the duration. The lock lasted one day when learned, and after two evolutions, that time was extended to nine days. The third evolution was a glyph that allowed the caster to bypass the lock. So now I could cast the arcane lock on the privy door, and I would be the only one who could open and close it for nine days. I didn’t get to evolve the spell further before our day off came.

Selina said Talia was visiting this off day and would be practicing with us. I really wanted to get a jump start on the *aether shield* spell so I was disappointed until she mentioned that I should talk with Callem. I had less and less time to talk with Callem. He was fully vested in making every student the best they could be. He had another academy vs. academy match coming in two weeks but wasn’t sure if we would be going to Aegis city or traveling to Stonefell Island. After we had decimated the Solaris top academy, he was finding it hard to get a match.

When I did talk with Callem, apparently, Selina had gotten him on board, with Talia being my first interview for my aspiring dungeon-delving team. So I guess I was not going to get out of meeting Talia on my day off. At least I could schedule the interview for first thing in the morning as Talia was landing in Solaris city early….