Chapter 63 Arc 2 Chapter 17

Callem seemed to be enjoying my dungeon delve project more than me.  As we walked back to the skyship platforms, he was going into a verbal training montage he was compiling for Sammie.  He had some guesses as to her abilities as well.  She had at least two, maybe as many as four.  I turned the conversation, “Callem. What do you think about Gimble?”

Callem didn’t hesitate to offer his opinion, “Above average fighter.  A small array of spells.  His motives...I think he is telling the truth.  Or at least mostly telling the truth.”  I was happy that I was not the only one who had trouble reading the elf.

Callem looked at me, seeing some concern, and added, “I don’t think he is a threat,” he looked behind us at Aelyn trailing us. “He will do everything to fulfill his debt to Aelyn’s mother.  Aelyn should have taken him up on his offer.  As for leading your dungeon team?  That was a brilliant move.  I sensed he has some type of hidden leadership skill.  The way he enthralled Sammie and Remy. He will also have too much pride not to do a great job in preparing them.”

“I was just hoping Aelyn would change her mind when I asked him to lead the team,” I said as I also looked back and checked on Aelyn.

Callem chuckled, “she will be mad at you for at least a month.  She does talk with Ennet and Wynna.  If I overhear anything I think you should know, I will inform you.”

“Callem, you are going to spy for me?  I’m flattered,” I tried to slap him on the back, but it felt like snapping some wall.

We stopped at the warehouse and went on a tour.  The first floor had walls. The second floor was already being started on.  We talked with the stone mage, and he was not using any wood, just stone.  Isla had paid for a double hardening on the stone.  The mage thought it was pointless.  Even one hardening, he argued, was overkill for a three-story building.  I would have to ask Isla about it.

I had some paranoid guesses.  Was she stalling the building’s progress?  Was there some type of kickback she was receiving from the extra expense?

The painter had finished his first panel and had sketched lines on two others.  The finished panel was of a succubus provocatively sitting on a slightly phallically shaped throne.  She had a shiny silver coin in her hand that she was playing with.  It was extremely erotic, maybe too erotic.  I decided I was not building a family-friendly restaurant. From that perspective, the mural was fantastic. The artist was not here, but I found some sketches for the massive mural outside.  It looked like he was moving the mural into an intricate action sequence. There were six adventurers, and the hydra had each head doing something different.  It was going to be epic.

Aelyn looked over my shoulder at the drawings as I paged through them.  She remained quiet but grunted in appreciation at some of the enlarged drawings.  The artist had full pages of each adventurer...maybe I should give my artist models...models of my adventurer team.  I put the thought on the back burner.

Callem was on the second floor, and we joined him.  Some window openings had been completed, and Callem was watching the plaza and skyships beyond, “This is the view that Wynna chose.  It is actually pretty amazing.  I forgot what it was like to be in the middle of the city, Storme,” he looked at me, “one day you will tell me won’t you?” A cold chill went down my spine.  Tell him what?  The open-ended question seemed like a trap to reveal something I was keeping secret.  Callem already knew most of my secrets.  He was a good person.  I trusted him like my own grandfather.

After a few minutes of watching a few sky ships land and depart, I said, “Callem, if you ask and I can answer, I will.”

After a few moments, he said, “Some secrets are best kept to oneself.  I have more than a few of my own.  We don’t have much time before our own skyship lands.  We should head up there.”  We left things unsaid.  We collected Aelyn and went up to the platform.  We boarded the ship and returned to Hen’s Hollow.  I walked in silence with the two to the center of town.  They veered off to Ennet’s house, and I went to see Isla.

Isla was upstairs in her room alone.  She opened the door as I knocked, “Storme!” she greeted me energetically.  “Come in!”

“Where is the pup?” I asked, looking around the room.

“Bylura returned to Loriel.  I think she is working with Cilia and Loriel as they purchase a small skyship,” she was making some tea on a magic hot plate and setting out some cookies.  She seemed way too excited.  When she brought me a cup of tea, she sat across from me at the small table.  “Did you see the progress when you visited the city today?  I think the walls for the second floor will be done by the next 7th day.”

I asked casually, “The progress is amazing,” definitely compared to a non-magic building’s pace of construction.  I ventured my question, “We talked with the stone mage.  He mentioned something about doubling up on the stone hardening.”

Isla looked thoughtful, “Yes, I haven’t run the numbers yet, but a third may be necessary.” She stopped there and didn’t continue.

I wanted answers, “Why is it necessary?  The mage said it was overkill?”

Isla looked confused, and then a light bulb went off, and she grabbed some papers from a stack, found one, and handed it to me.  She explained, “Loriel got your warehouse zoned for skyships.  The entire warehouse.  So I thought it would be a good idea to have the roof capable of supporting the weight of a skyship.”  It was not a bad idea.  Unnecessary, but not a bad idea.  I had been spending coins without restraint.  Isla seemed to read my thougths.  “Loriel was only able to make it happen because the warehouse was adjacent to the skyship platforms.”

I didn’t like this happening without my knowledge.  I also pieced some things together.  Loriel was buying a personal skyship, and she was crewing it...Isla was making the roof of my warehouse capable of nearing the weight of a skyship.  I thought it best to nip this in the bud, “The reinforcement is fine.  But I want the entire roof covered in gardens.  It can serve as an emergency landing for my skyship, but I don’t plan to use it as such.”

Isla’s eyes slowly realized what I was saying. She wanted to say something but wisely held her tongue.  “Loriel needs to understand this is my building.  If she wants a private dock for her skyship, then she can renovate her building.”  The remaining review of the progress was done with short responses. Isla was probably trying to come up with a way to tell Loriel that her private landing pad had just been removed from play.

I went home to have dinner with my family. I was quickly allowed to make dinner. They had a roasted chicken. Instead of using the chicken as is, I made a pie crust and cut up vegetables and a heavy gravy. The chicken pot pie took time and gave me time to talk with my family for a late dinner. Freya was upset with her tutors. They wanted more of her time every week, and she wanted to run her business empire.

Freya was under the impression that she didn’t need the academy or an apprenticeship. It was probably true as she was making almost as much as father was making as a skyship guard. She did have nearly twenty of the kids in Hen’s Hollow working for her. The older ones ran to the city while the younger ones ran jobs in town.

Mother was getting ready to take her master’s test again. This time she planned to travel to the guild in Aegis city instead, bypassing the Solaris’ city guild. Father’s promotion had resulted in him being away more often from home. Pascal was not at dinner but had been at lunch today.

I let them know that Callem and Wynna had purchased an apartment building in the Aegis city, and I was opening a restaurant on the ground floor. This got a lively conversation going, and I admitted I planned to attend the academy in Aegis city and not in the capital. Freya was the most excited to have her brother close, well just a short skyship ride away.

The questions on which academy I planned to attend were deflected. Father wanted me to attend the officer school for guards, while mother was hoping I would go to the scholarium. The problem with the scholarium was they didn’t teach any magic. It was a school for people without an awakened aether core.

After dinner, I hugged my family and went back to the barracks. Gareth was in his bed and studying his textbook for his dungeon delving class. I asked, “Where are the twins?” Gareth looked up from his book.

“Their brother had the baby, well his wife had the baby. They are out at their farm and will be back early tomorrow,” he dove back into his book.

I cleaned the room with my spell and lay down and cycled through my array of focus and aether exercises. Our door was cracked open, and Mia knocked and entered, “Storme, can you help me study for the enchanting exam?” She said it like she was afraid to ask.

“We have an exam?” I asked, slightly confused.

“Well, the practical. I have to be able to use the stylus to write out the two basic runes. Since you are already making magic items, I don’t think you need to show proficiency,” she said softly. She looked at Gareth, “We can practice in my room so as to not disturb…” she indicated to Gareth.

“All you need to do is practice writing them,” I said, confused and not getting up. I was probably worse with the stylus than Mia, as I used my metal-shaping ability.

She didn’t move and then said, “Can you watch me and point out my mistakes?” It was closer to a plead than a question.

Gareth gave me a sideways glance and moved with his chin for me to go. I finally got it. Mia wanted some private time with me. The twins were not here, and my relationship with Mera was on rocky ground, so Mia was making a move. I had so much to do, though, “You can practice at my desk in here and call me over when you need help.”

Mia tilted her head, considering, “Ok, I will be back in a minute.” She returned, worked on her enchanting, and called me over every few minutes to check it. I pointed out her mistakes, and she tried again. After two hours, she left to go to her room.

Gareth closed the door after she left and asked, “Why are you not interested in her, Storme? She is practically throwing herself at you.”

I huffed, “I am just not ready, Gareth.” He rolled his eyes and continued with his book. The fact was that I was ready. My aether burn had mellowed out, and I was using my focus techniques to avoid any potentially embarrassing situation. I could use my privacy shield to hide myself getting personal relief, and then use my *cleanliness* spell to eliminate the evidence. It was an option I would probably make use of. I was still waiting to grow another two inches and fill out to match what I expected my adult form to be. I was growing faster and hoped by the end of the year to reach my physical maturity…catching up with my already mature reproductive equipment.

I set my *alarms* and *privacy* spells. I pulled a dungeon resource book out and a note pad. In five weeks, I might be sending my team on their first resource-gathering mission. I had three types of wood I wanted for my skyship. Only two were accessible in Skyholme’s dungeons. And of those two, only one was available in Aegis city’s dungeon.

The book of resources did have a reference for all the levels of a dungeon. I looked at the first level of the two dungeons in Aegis city since that seemed the best option for my crew. I found three resources I thought might be valuable. I had to pay 10 gold per delve attempt, and that got me an 8-hour window to operate in the dungeon. For every hour past eight there was a 20% resource penalty paid to the waiting guild reservation. Also, departing adventures were scanned for dungeon essences. All dungeon essences were purchased by the Trivumverate at fixed costs. I didn’t have to worry about that as I didn’t plan to have my party fight any floor guardians.

Honey. There were giant bees and bee hives where honey could be harvested. It sold for nearly 120 silver per gallon. Sugar was a valuable commodity. With honey, I could have Mera make mead, so stockpiling it wouldn’t be a bad idea. The typical harvest on a delve was listed at 9 gallons of honey. My team could do better if they had to just focus on harvesting the honey.

Frost berries. These grew under snow drifts and were difficult to harvest but highly useful in alchemy and made a great jam. The snow drifts were miles across and right before the final level one boss in the same dungeon as the honey. Those were the only two commodities in significant amounts on the first level. There were dozens of herbs listed as well, but bulk quantities would be difficult to harvest in a short 8-hour span. The spawning monsters had some harvestable materials, but I didn’t have a skinner in my group.

The math was not good. To break even on each delve, I was looking at 35 gold in salaries and fees on top of housing and food for all my potential six delvers. If they got 10 gallons of honey and it was made into forty gallons of mead. Which at current market prices was just under 12 gold. So converting the honey to mead did not add any value to the product. Hopefully, I could overcome this flaw with a higher-quality product. Frost berries sold for 30 silver per pound. Harvest amounts were somewhat unlimited, but I figured five pounds was a good target.

So my total had about 14 gold worth of goods coming out. I would be the laughingstock of every dungeon delve company of they found out. Maybe after Gimble got them experienced enough, they could tackle the boss and do some harvesting on the second level. There were giant boars down there, and the aether-infused meat was quite valuable, looking at the charts in my books.

I put down my books and notes back into my dimensional storage. If I didn’t have unlimited funds getting a new dungeon delving team starting up would have been a headache. I thought about assigning rooms to the new delve team but planned to have them all on the third floor. So would have to wait. I got up and went to the bathroom. I really wanted the bowel purge upgrade for my *cleanliness* spell, but I was getting close to the upgrades to be able to clean others…decisions.

As I was returning from the privy, I heard people having sex. They were trying to be quiet, but it was obvious what they were doing. I got to my room and reset my privacy screens. I decided to burp the worm myself. Settling in, my mind cycled on who to focus on. Aelyn was the first woman to enter my mindscape, but it felt wrong. I tried to imagine her without her mark but couldn’t do it. My thoughts drifted to Sammie, and I dropped that quickly. Sammie was essentially a female version of Gareth. That almost killed my session right there. I tried Mia….I built momentum with her, but as I got close, I flashed to Isla and finished on thoughts of her.

I didn’t dwell on it, just used my *cleanliness* spell and went to sleep.

On 6th day, we were going to have a match against another academy. Callem still hadn’t found a willing opponent for us after we had obliterated the top academy in Solaris city. On 7th day my delve team was coming to Hen’s Hollow for a reading from Wynna. Well, Sammie, Remy and Lana were coming. Lana still had not made the cut but if I couldn’t find another porter I guess I could give her a trial run.

The week did not go well. Aelyn seemed apathetic. Callem didn’t have any keys to her emotive state for me. The conditioning sessions were not as intense because of this. Everyone was tense in weapons training because a first-year academy from the capital island was coming out for the competition. The town’s folk were doing their best to build a makeshift arena in our training yard.

The upcoming contest had everyone extremely uptight except for Gareth. Callem had announced the prize to the winning academy was four hundred gold, which didn’t help everyone’s anxiety. The entire town of Hen’s Hollow would also be out for the contest.

The tension with Mera didn’t abate and only worsened when Gareth and Fera seemingly got much closer. I had my own focus on learning the aether shield spell, getting the crap beat out of me by the weapon’s masters at Twin Rocks, and finishing my design for an ice cream churn. Instructor Aethon convinced me to sell my ice cream maker in his family’s store and even license it for his family to manufacture. Tasting good chocolate ice cream for the first time would do that to someone.

My aether shield spell was moving close to imprinting by the end of the week. If I could have spent 7th day with Selina, I probably could have finished the imprinting process. Instead, I was going to be working with my dungeon crew after they got their readings from Wynna and Ennet. On the morning of 6th day the entire dinning hall was quiet.

It was Gareth who stood up and tried to give his first rousing speech. It went well, except he ended it with, ‘Don’t Lose.’ I face palmed.