Chapter 19 Aether Core Awareness

Tuesday morning Iris picked me and Rob up at the bus stop as planned.  I was torn on whether to allow Sophia to come with us.  Being the gossip that she was I would have to be on guard for what was said during the 12-minute drive to school.

Fortunately, Rob and Iris talked mostly about class assignments for their AP classes.  I confirmed with Iris that she was going to drive me home after school so I could deposit some money at the bank, I had grabbed $5000 this morning, enough to pay for the college courses.  She looked tired, with dark circles under her eyes and her hair, not quite the normal silky perfect flowing ponytail she liked to sport.

When we parked Rob and Sophia went inside and we had some time to talk.  “Are you doing ok?  You look worn out.”

Iris looked straight ahead, “Yeah the magic stim pills get less and less effective.  They wear on the body.” She paused and looked over at me, “I only have two weeks before we enter the transit and if I can just learn one more spell it should help us.”

Interested I asked, “What spell are you working on?”

“Lightning shield.  It interposes a small disc between me and an attacker. It doesn’t do a lot of damage but should stun the target for a second or two.”  It is a lower-tier 1 spell and I think I should be able to learn it.

“What about me?  You said you would show me your library and give me some books to learn aether manipulation.  Can we do this today?”  She looked indecisive at my question.

“Yes you can come over today,” she finally said. I didn’t understand her hesitation.  Oh, I'm an idiot!  She probably was thinking I would want to have sex.

“I just want to check out your library this afternoon after school,” I said while exiting the truck.  Did she look relieved or disappointed?  I couldn’t tell and didn’t want to stare so headed inside.

Adam once again asked me to join the rowing team as I entered the school.  He must have been waiting for me.  I turned him down again.  I ran into James as well.  He was excited to get skating with me.  We talked briefly before I went to homeroom.  I spent a few minutes doing texts.  Mary was very persistent and asked if I needed a ride again after school so I replied saying I did not.  A sad emoji was returned.

Classes flew by and Molly couldn’t stop smiling at me in English class.  Oh, right I should add the sophomore dance to my phone calendar.  Ms. Cunningham asked to talk with me about my paper in private during class.  I thought she was going to give me some feedback but instead, she questioned whether or not I had written it!

She quizzed me for a little while on the contents and then I gave her some of the ideas I left out of the paper which seemed to quell her ideas I had plagiarized the paper.  I told her that my enhanced effort was mostly due to how fascinating I found the subject matter.  I couldn’t be irate with her as it was obviously a much better paper than she had any right to expect from me.

At lunch, I sat with Rob and his sister.  Iris said she was getting a power nap in the library.  Rob and I talked about Call of Duty for a bit and he hoped to play Friday night.  Unfortunately, I had committed to helping Aunt Amelia so I couldn’t.  Saturday night, nope I had the hockey team party.  I felt my best friend was slowly being squeezed out of my social life.  I would have to give serious thought to how not to lose my best friend.

When school ended I met Iris at her truck and she drove me to the bank and I deposited the cash.  I told the teller the truth.  I was signing up for some online classes so I needed to put my savings in the bank to use it.  After we drove to Iris’ house and she began to school me in the dangers of dungeons.

Her descriptions really did make it sound like a video game.  Slimes, oozes, horned bunnies, wolves, kobolds…just a litany of beginner monsters from RPG games.  When I compared it to computer games she said ‘Where do you think the games got all their ideas!’ Well, I guessed that kind of made sense.

We entered her house and she went to the kitchen to get something to eat while I wandered over to the study.  I started reading the book covers and I was confused.  Nothing in here seemed magical.  Iris entered the room eating some toast and spoke, “Use your abyssal sight.”  I did as she suggested and found one set of shelves glowed with runes.  I walked over and looked closer.  A lot of the decorative rosettes looked linked.  Iris came up behind me. “This is an easy puzzle.  You need to rotate these for rosettes so N faces up, E faces right, S faces down and W faces left.  You can only see the lettering and arrows with magic.” Well, I will be damned!  I turned the rosettes as she had indicated and an audible click occurred.  Iris grabbed the shelf and it swung open.

“The arcane library is beyond, my Sanctum Sanctorum!” Her comic waving of the hands was not lost on me.  At least she was a comic book fan…or maybe she just watched the movies. I walked down a short hallway to a square room with books lining every wall.

“These are all magical?” I asked fascinated by what I was seeing.

“Most are just books with knowledge about magic and the layers.  These two shelves on this wall are the spell books.” She indicated about 50 books on two shelves.  “These four books are the primers for aether core manipulation,” she said as she pulled out three books on one shelf and a fourth on another.  “This book,” she pulled a thick volume out, “is the magical codex for the runic script in the spell book. Once you get all five of these books down pat then you can try your hand at a spell.”  She looked a little smug.  She had said it had taken her years to learn control.

There were two plush reading chairs in here on either side of a fancy wooden desk.  Iris ignored me as she took one of the chairs and a book from the table.  It was probably the spell she was trying to learn.  She took out her phone and set a timer for three hours. “I need to temper my study time with schoolwork.  I still need to get my college scholarships next year,” she explained and started studying. I moved to the other chair with my five allocated books stacked in front of me.

So how do I add these books to my mind space?  I picked the first one up and then went to my mind space. Nope, just touching the book didn’t work.  I paged through the book and checked again.  Nothing.  Of course, this was going to be hard.  Next, I didn’t read each page but did spend a few seconds clearly seeing everything on each page, like taking a picture without examining the details.  I didn’t think this would work but when I popped into my mind space the book was on the floor.  I opened it and yes…it looked complete!  So it took maybe twenty minutes in the real world to ‘scan’ a 300-page book into my mind space.

By the time I finished all five books it had been two hours.  I stood, cracked my back, and went to put the books on the shelf. “Giving up already?” Iris said with some humor.

“I downloaded the books to my mind space so I can study them at will,” I smirked at her.  Her face was disbelief which turned into agitation.  I went to the shelves trying to decide what other info I should store away.  Demonology sounded good…and…Basics of Alchemy.  Maybe I could impress Iris with my alchemy knowledge at some point.  I stood at the shelves scanning both books.  I was looking for a third when Iris’ phone went off.

“Do you want a ride or are you planning to take the bus?” She asked.

“You have to study so I can take the bus,” I said.  “Try to get some sleep too.” I left her house and headed over to the bus stop.  On the ride home I answered all my text messages.  A middle-aged woman ‘accidentally’ fell in my lap when we hit a bump.  I really needed my own car.  Getting felt up on the bus felt sleazy.

I ate some Panera with my parents when I got home.  They kept asking me about Iris since I had spent the evening at her house.  I deflected and said we had just studied.  Back in my room, I paid for the community college courses.  Maybe I should have done them one at a time since I had essentially started the 14-week timer on all of them.  I had to complete all the modules before I could register for the final exam on campus with the supervising professor.

Tonight I was not even going to start the courses so I probably should have waited.  I planned to retreat into my mind space and read my new aether manipulation books.  I did spend some time setting up tabs on my computer for each of the courses and putting reminders in my phone calendar.  I was feeling confident that I could get this done.

Withing my mind space the first thing I worked on was making the bed more comfortable.  Now I don’t pretend to understand how or why the bed was lumpy and the sheets were abrasive in the first place.  It took me twenty trips back and forth to a computer to get a nice foam mattress feeling and get the sheets to a sheer silky black.  The comforter was down feathers with a milky white color.  I added a half dozen feather pillows with the same black silk pillowcases.  The thick four posts of the bed held a sheer white canopy.  Why the detail?  It was mostly an experiment, exercising my mind space.  Since I didn’t have a manual on using the space I was making it up as I went along. The more I did the easier it was so I assumed I was on the correct path.

At the foot of the bed, I added a large plush leather reading chair and began my journey into magic.

Every 20 hours or so I would take a nap before resuming my study.   By chance, I noticed an interesting tidbit.  Using my mind space took aether.  It looked to be around 1 aether for every day I spent in the space.  I wasn’t hurting for aether when I started, sitting at a comfortable 53.  But after a few ‘days’ of study, it had dropped to 46.  Since I needed to accumulate some aether stores for our trip into the transit I was a bit frustrated.  In the real world, I only generated about 25 aether a day.  So I decided to reserve just 5 aether daily for my studies, giving me five total days of study each night within my mind space.

My progress had been slow.  Manipulating your aether was all about being able to see it.  This was not difficult with abyssal eyes.  The second step was being able to feel it.  Much more difficult than it sounded.  There were a dozen suggestions in the text on how to achieve this.  None of them worked for me of course.  I was getting ready to give up completely for now when something clicked.  The ceiling of my mind space transformed into a shimmering white silvery pool.  When it wasn’t disturbed it just looked like metallic pearl paint.  When it was disturbed it rippled like water that I could pull down from the ceiling and manipulate it in front of me.  I had skipped right from the ‘feel’ stage to the manipulation stage!

It wasn’t easy manipulating the aether. My best description was a toddler trying to herd chickens.  I had poor control of my limbs and the chickens instinctually fled when I got close…but every once in a while a chicken forgot to move away and I brushed its feathers.  I had a long way to go.  But I still thought my progress was impressive given my relative time investment was around 140 hours in the mind space.  Before leaving I established a large grandfather clock in my space next to the bed.  It was just going to be a tracker for me to let me know how long I was in the space and not lose my time sense.

In the real world, it was 5:19 am.  I dressed and did some advanced homework, getting ahead in classes, while I waited for school.  I went downstairs for breakfast and while I was making eggs at 6:30 dad came out dressed.  I asked, “Opening today?”

”Yeah, Helen moved to afternoons so I am opening now,” he said not happy about it.  “Your mother and I talked about getting you a car last night.”  I put down my toast instantly alert.  Dad explained, “With hockey practice so early in the morning it made sense and I convinced her.  Come by the dealership after school and take a look at the trash trade-ins we have, ok?”

Since my dad’s dealership sold new luxury cars they usually dumped most of the trade-ins for cheap to other dealerships.  If the trade-in had value they would put it on their used car lot for sale.  That was where dad got his Land Rover and mom’s Lexus.  “That would be amazing dad!  See you around 3:00?”  Damn, I wasn’t going to able to think all day.

At the bus stop, I told Rob the good news and knew Sophia being the gossip she was would spread it like wildfire.  When Iris picked us up she looked ragged.  She probably didn’t sleep last night and used another pill.

I told her I didn’t need a ride this afternoon and Sophia spilled that I was going to look at cars.  My school day was a blur and I ignored a mounting number of texts on my phone while I researched cars every free moment I had.

During the last period, I left the study hall and headed across town to the dealership. I got there at 2:40.  Dad was sitting in his glass office and waved and came out.  Together we went out back where the mechanic's garage was located.  I got super excited when I saw the Challenger Hellcat sitting just outside the bay doors.

“Yeah, not that one.  It was a trade-in but it sold immediately.  Your mom would kill me as well, it was $45,000. We decided on a budget of $18,000 and you are going to have to pay the $2,400 insurance yourself back to us over the summer.  I was a new driver so insurance was high.  I remember dad telling me it was more than that to have me placed on the insurance for both of their cars so he was probably giving me a discount.  I usually worked at the dealership over the summer, helping detail cars for sale or after they got repaired.  $2,400 would be just about everything I would make during the summer. Not that I needed to worry about money currently with all the cash up in my room.

We came to a row of cars, “You can pick from these.  The mechanics checked them and all passed their cursory inspection.” The end car was a metallic blue RAV4. Next up was a Subaru wagon with a dull gray finish. The third was a white Jeep Compass.  The final car in the row was a black Nissan Pathfinder.  I looked back at the Hellcat wistfully. I checked out each vehicle inside and out, before deciding on the Pathfinder.  It was the largest of the bunch and was the oldest but had the least miles at 29,800.  It also had leather seats and a luxury package. It was old and checking the model year found it to be 8 years old but looked in great shape.

“Good choice Caleb.  That was a kick-around-town car for a banker’s wife.  She spent a lot of time traveling so the car didn’t get many miles on it.  It had a few recalls but our mechanics should be able to take care of them.  I think I can get it ready for you by Monday, Tuesday at the latest,” he had a big smile on his face and I matched it with my own grin.

I texted Paige as dad drove us home.  I sent her a few photos of the car and she was excited for me.  She asked if I was going to drive Mary down for her visit.  Probably not as I had hockey practice I replied in a text.  She said that she and her friends would be at my home game during their Thanksgiving break.  Mom must have sent her my schedule as I didn’t even remember we had a game that weekend.  I checked and yep, it was actually our first game of the season against the team that knocked us out of the playoffs last year, St Joe’s Prep. I think they were runner-ups for the state championship last year too.

At home, it was all smiles and we had Vincent’s deliver us salads and subs in celebration.  I also broke the news that I was trying to graduate a year early by taking a few classes online at the community college.  This shocked both of them but they were excited.  Their son had become an athlete, and scholar and started dating all in the span of a week!

Thursday and Friday at school moved fast.  Iris was looking worse and worse.  I was thinking of forcibly removing her protection amulet and using my charm ability to get her to get some sleep.  I only saw her when she drove us to school and briefly at lunch.

My own focus after school was getting home, working on the college courses, and then spending my allocated time in my mind space working on aether manipulation.  I was starting to see why Iris had said it had taken her four years to learn enough control. The aether was starting to respond to me. You couldn’t force it. It was more like coaxing it.

After school on Friday, I had to go help my Aunt Amelia.  I was able to borrow my mom’s car to get to the address she had sent me.  It was a good twenty-minute drive from home.