**Chapter 11 Magic Isn’t Easy**

I woke often during the night, trying to reposition my body to avoid pain. I also came to one conclusion; I needed more pillows! I slept in short bursts and dreamed of getting beaten by a sword, casting amazing magic, running a merchant empire, and buying a horse, only to find the horse talked and didn’t like to be ridden.

It was a crazy night, and the fatigue, large amounts of food in my stomach, and growing anxieties needed to be addressed. I was up far too early, consolidated my wealth into my money pouch, and went to the barn before anyone else was up. I was going to age the gold coins, but to my absolute horror, I found butter in the butter churn! Freya! I scraped out what I could and disposed of it in the refuse pit. I then added the coins, some stones, metal nails, dirt, and coal. Then I began to churn the coins. It was a little noisy, but the barn should be far enough from the house to not wake anyone.

After thirty minutes, I used some wet rags to clean the coins. I thought they looked passable, and I placed them into my pouch. The butter remnants had probably helped dirty the coins, but I would have to talk with Freya to see what she was up to with making butter. I walked to see Gareth at his house and couldn’t help but grin. Gareth was cutting wood but was definitely moving with a lot of discomfort. He noticed me and seemed to stand straighter, trying to hide his own pains. “Stormy! Ready for the morning stretches?” His grin was on his face. So that was it. We were playing a silent game of who could endure the pain the best.

We began the stretches, and we began the tough guy game. Soon I was moaning and groaning over the movements as my muscles were doing their best to tell me enough already! After a while, Gareth stopped being so exact in correcting my movements, and I was thankful when we finished the routine. “Stormy, we need to complete the series in 30 minutes, according to Callem.” I just glared at him while he grinned. Maybe I wouldn’t give him an allowance today in the city as recompense for these assaults on my body.

I moaned and sighed, “We should get to the city in haste this morning. I want to purchase my spell and return to practice it. What if we go to Twin Rocks Lake with our poles when we get back? You can fish, and I can practice my spell.”

Gareth seemed to consider. “You want to go back to the city to sell fish later today?” I hadn’t thought of that. No. that would be a waste of time, and I churned over some ideas before responding.

“You know that camping kit you always wanted at the adventurer’s shop? Why don’t you get it and we can cook the fish by the lake for dinner? I will write down some vegetables and cooking supplies you can also get.” Gareth immediately fist-pumped. Ok, I should have never shown him that gesture from my past life.

We spent a short time getting breakfast and packing snacks at the Hen’s Hollow general store. I returned home and strapped on my dagger at Gareth’s insistence. Freya was up and devastated she wasn’t going with us to the city today. However, her birthday was just around the corner, and I teased her about her present. If she ransacked my room looking for it, she would find the dress in the bag under my bed, and that should make her happy.

Soon Gareth and I were walking toward the city. It was the smallest city on Titan’s Shield but big enough for us. The city was called Solaris, after a sun god. Religion was not practiced much by the citizens of Skyhomle. The only representation of the god in the city was his likeness in a fountain in one of the squares.

The maps of Titan’s Shield showed it to be oval in shape, with the widest part around 150 miles (240 km) and the short side of the oval being 80 miles (125 km). There were four cities on the island, forming a diamond shape. Our city was at the bottom, while the island’s capital city was at the top of the map and was called Aegis City. It was the capital because it was built on top of one of the two dungeons on our island. The other dungeon on the island was up in the mountains overlooking the capital, so yes, the city of Aegis had a monopoly on both dungeons. The other two cities were similar to ours in that farms and light industry surrounded them. If you also looked at the map of the island, it was clear our small town of Hen’s Hollow was close to the edge, just a few miles from a very long drop.

During the walk to the city, Gareth asked, “Do you think we should get some recovery potions from an alchemist?” He was being serious, and I remember Captain Callem had an impressive array of potions. But I had read a lot and knew some general things about potions.

“We should stay away from potions, Gareth. Heavy use when you are young can stunt your growth. Well, maybe in your case, that would be good for you.” I ducked a lazy swing by Gareth. But it was true. Using potions did adversely affect the growth of young people. Or, to be more precise, poorly made potions had adverse effects, and one thing the Skyholme people lacked was quality alchemists.

Oh, there were a lot of alchemists and even some good ones, but the prices were extremely high, and the effects were not too impressive from what little I understood of the other civilizations throughout the sphere. This was in part due to Skyholme’s limited array of ingredients. We had very few dungeons on Skyholme, and our trade with the lowlands was constantly in turmoil. The genuinely effective alchemy ingredients rarely grew outside of dungeons.

“Ok, Gareth, get us each a minor restorative potion for minor wounds. That should be what, 50 silver each, maybe? Here take three gold for everything today but stay with me until Wigand’s. The local kids have been eyeing me.” Gareth’s face clouded in anger as I reminded him of my body being used as target practice.

“You will stay in Wigand’s till I return?” He looked at me, waiting for the question to be answered.

“Fine, yes, you want an oath or something?” I was teasing him because I planned to get my spell and fall into the bookstore’s big plush leather reading chair. My aching body was looking forward to it.

We ran into no problems getting to Wigand’s, and Gareth left for his errands. On entering the shop, Wigand came out of the back room with his usual good cheer. “Storme! So good to see you! I got your spellbook in the back! And have a few other books you may be interested in.” Wigand was always the salesman. I smiled tightly in response. I pulled out the 20 gold coins. It was ten for my spell book and the ten gold deposit for the other.

“Fantastic! When the copy is ready, I will let you know to get me the remaining 50 gold from your benefactor.” Fifty gold. An unreal sum when I stopped to think about my family. My abilities and wealth would improve their quality of life after the academy.

Wigand went to get my spell book, and when he returned, it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. It was a thick book with a black cover and the title in silver letters embedded in the leather, Guidance for Personal Manicuring and Hygiene, The Comprehensive Handbook for the Cleanliness Spell by Archmagi Sana Velin. It wasn’t overly special compared to any other book I had read, but it was mine, and as I took it, I am ashamed to admit I hugged it to my chest for a brief moment before realizing what I was doing. Wigand had a knowing smile, and his eyes were on me.

“So Storme, I have two other books you may be interested in as you are just beginning down your path to magic. I take it you do not have a teacher,” He looked embarrassed for a second. Wigand didn’t like to pry into other people’s business unless asked. “Well, I have two books, as I said, Understanding Spell Imprinting and Aether Core Facilitation. Both are very old, out-of-date printings from the Skyholme Magus Academy in the capital, but they are two important primers for new mages. I got both books at the same estate sale. I got them with your *cleanliness* spell for very cheap.”

Spell Imprinting was the process of learning a new spell. I knew this much. A mage could only learn so many spells based on his or her capacity to lock the spell form to their aether matrix. The process was commonly called imprinting from my readings. Once locked in, a mage could evolve a spell as it essentially ‘leveled up.’ “How much?” I asked, very interested.

Wigand relaxed and smiled, “Two gold for both or a gold and fifty silver for the imprinting book and fifty silver for the aether core book.” Extremely reasonable as both books should be a few gold coins new. I paid him with one gold and ten large silvers. Both books were well-worn and contained about twenty pages each with text on both sides. I went to the comfy chair to read, and Wigand went about his work, sensing I didn’t want to be disturbed.

I opened the spellbook because, just like in my last life, I skipped the directions, confident I could figure it out on my own. I read the forward by Archmagi Sana Velin.

Many have overlooked the usefulness of the basic spells. I have always believed that a spell is a living, evolving companion to magi. Within those evolutions, a simple spell can be utilized far beyond the originally intended scope. For this tomb, I talked to dozens of mages from all walks of life who had mastered the Cleanliness spell and detailed their evolutions within. One woman had extended the range to clean others, another mage increased the range so far he could clean entire rooms! One hunter frequently used the spell during tracking to eliminate his odor. A warrior who battled in the arena used it to sterilize his injuries. In all, you will find 254 unique evolutions within.

-Archmage Sana Velin, Instructor of the Tertiary Codex

Well, I was super excited as I turned the page. I was ready to learn my first spell. The spell forms made me dizzy looking at them as I paged through. Four pages full of magic lines that made little sense to me, and this was a basic spell, granted with some complexity. I just had to burn those four pages into my memory right?

I spent twenty minutes and just got nauseous looking at the curvy lines forming spiraling circuits. I turned to the evolutionary index for the spell. The first thing that caught my eye under the ‘adding a lingering scent’ was that vanilla was listed as an option. Ok, my first evolution would definitely be that. Other things that attracted me; extending simple effects, the fresh breath evolution track, and the health track for the elimination of bacteria and disease within a caster. After each evolution, there were details on coercing the spell to initiate the new desired effect, the book provided a structured overlay for the spell form alteration. The spell truly had some depths. I spent almost two hours picking out the evolutions I wanted before Gareth returned with an extremely large pack.

“So Stormy, are you a wizard yet?” His grin turned to a laugh as I stared at him with indignity. “Ok, let’s go. The pack has a folding fishing pole in it, so I don’t need to stop and get mine at home.” He knew me too well. I would spend my day on the spell and not fishing. The walk to Twin Rocks was down a lightly trodden path and a good hour from the city. We could circle around Hen’s Hollow without losing any time. Not many people went there. Besides the blue pike, there wasn’t much. At the lake, we set up between the two big rocks on the shore for which the lake was named after. The lake had good depth here, and we usually did well fishing there.

Gareth set his line and set his pole and then went to stretch but, before doing so, tossed me a small vial which I caught. “The restorative potion. Expiration is on the cap.” He said, turning away and going through the stupid limbering exercises for a second time today. I put the vial half the size of a test tube in my pocket. We would need a separate pouch on our belts for them.

I went to my studying while Gareth proceeded with his own training. After a short while, I reluctantly picked up the spell imprinting book and read it cover to cover and was deeply saddened. Imprinting a spell took weeks! A tier one spell took a new mage on average 20 days! The best advice they had was to trace out the spell forms over and over. I was unhappy as I had been hoping to cast my spell today.

The other book was a quicker read. It focused on understanding how to focus inwardly and find your aether core. But most importantly, it described the aether in a newly formed core as thick molasses. You needed to thin the aether by ‘stirring’ it constantly and using it up to draw in the fresh aether. So this cheaper book was actually more useful. It was probably why I couldn’t make less than an ounce of metal at a time. I needed to thin out my aether to be able to control it better.

The book highly suggested getting magic devices to charge with aether if the mage didn’t have a spell or ability to empty their core. Apparently, regularly drawing on the aether core was important to help it grow and do the exercises described within. I added this to my to-do list, well, I just had to remember to make coins every day. Maybe I could disguise myself as just a mage with spells and no abilities in the future. The last thing I wanted was to be chained in some noble’s dungeon, making endless amounts of coin for them. I put away the spellbook and imprinting book and started focusing on my core. There were 23 suggested exercises detailed in the book. All of them are supposedly simple but hard to master. I was on exercise 5 when Gareth yelled.

“Storme, move it!” I looked around in panic and didn’t see anything besides Gareth running at me. Then a massive beast of black feathers and talons barreled into me from above.