Chapter 106

When we returned to the Shiny Platinum, I was met by two very anxious beasts in the room.  I had been gone for nearly ten hours.  I cleaned their cages with my cleanliness spell and let them both out.  Adrial was even happy to see me.  She balled her tentacles and hugged my leg, not letting go.  I fed both of them raw cubed chicken mixed with ground steak.  I continued their training from the book using the reward system when they followed commands.   For being only a few weeks old, they picked things up quickly.  The white one, Kiara, learned quickly, and her sister, the black one, soon followed to get the food reward.

After the cats were fed and played out, I tossed my three spell books on the table; invisibility, comprehend languages, and arcane web.  I was getting closer to imprinting the invisibility spell; it would be a good trump card.  The other two were high priority, but I needed to finish the current spell.  Still, I procrastinated and paged through the other two books.  I then took a piece of paper and outlined my typical week.

1st, 2nd, 4th, and 5th days I would wake up early and do my stretching and sword forms in the training room in the Shiny Platinum. It was a massive fifty-by-one-hundred-foot room filled with weapons racks, training dummies, and targets.  After, I would spend an hour with Kiara and Adrail, training and feeding them.  I would then go to my classes.  I had tier 1 creatures first and then spell class for arcane web.  After spell class I had a one-hour lunch.  I planned to do my studying for tier 1 creatures during this lunch hour while eating.

My lunch would be prepared and boxed by staff at the Shiny Platinum. I figured I might as well use my staff and expensive restaurant for some extra benefits.  Gypsum had told me there were only a few tables in the library where you could eat, so I would need to get there quickly.

After lunch, my final class was Ley Line Theory.  After this class, I was done with dungeon academy for the day.  I would come back to the Shiny Platinum with Fera and Mera. I would spend an hour with the cats again, completing their two hours of training for the day.  Then I would study my spells and work on my aether core exercises.  After that I would empty my aether core to create coins.  After coins, I would dabble with enchanting.  The end of my day would be forty minutes of combat training with Bleiz.  This would include practicing my new exchange ability now that the teleportation protections had been disabled in Skyholme.  Then I would get a hot shower, a cold bath, and off to bed for seven hours of sleep.  I envied Gareth’s ability only to require a few hours of sleep to get a full rest.

On 3rd day, my morning would be the same, but my first class at the academy would be conditioning.  The conditioning would mix all four groups at the academy for team building.  Right after conditioning, I had combat training.  This was group combat, coordinating with a team. Teams could be random or planned.  The thing with dungeon academies is they were preparing the students to fight monsters, not other humans, but coordinating attacks was important.  Lunch would follow combat training.  Then I was free to leave campus.  I planned to study my Ley Line Theory for the coming week instead of returning to the Shiny Platinum.  This would hopefully keep me on a set schedule and not confuse the two cats.

Sixth and seventh days were off for me.  Gareth had morning classes on the sixth day, though.  I planned to take the Maelstrom out on the two-day break with Cilia and Leda. I wanted to start visiting cities in the lowlands and continue my search for Aelyn. Even though they had my communication stones, I had not heard any news from them talking with Loriel. I knew they had traveled on a transport to the capital and had yet to return.

Someone knocked, and I answered the door. It was Beliz, and he came in and sat down and looked at my schedule, “Can I have a copy of this?”

“You can have that copy. I have committed it to memory and just wanted to write it out. How was Freya today?” I asked.

“She gave her tutors a little lip but apologized at the end. She went to visit your father at work, and a dock hand gave her a hassle, so I took care of it. She took a trip to Hen’s Hollow after lunch to see her friends, and we just returned before you did,” Bleiz stated.

“Did she know you were there?” I asked with a smile.

Freya had made it a game to friend Bleiz with Monty. Bleiz shook his head, “I was visible for the transport ride to Hen’s Hollow, and we talked about me teaching her to swing a blade. I told her it was up to you.”

I nodded and thought, “She is going to start feeding Kiara and Adrail at lunch, now that I am at the academy. It will help her build trust with them. You can spend time in the training room with her after.”

Bleiz paused and then said, “I heard a few rumors you might be interested in. Someone is trying to replicate the Shiny Platinum in Skyhold. They have recruited two of your cooks.”

I shrugged, “Not a concern. This building cost a lot of platinum and only makes a few golds a week. It will take me decades to recuperate my investment. Maybe they could charge three to four times as much in the capital, but it still wouldn’t be a profitable venture. As long as they do not try to co-opt the name.” I paused, “Actually, go talk to the artist, Tatem, tomorrow. Make sure he doesn’t take any commissions for this new restaurant. I want all the panels to be unique to the Shiny Platinum. Anything else?”

Bleiz nodded, “Two of the warehouse you have been purchased. One is being converted into an inn, and the other is some type of curiosity shop. Neither will open for months.”

Shit. I had greatly increased the traffic in the area, and new buildings would be profitable. I should have bought a few buildings. I looked at Bleiz, “Go to the capital and talk to Bylura. See if she can get Loriel to buy me the one warehouse next to the Shiny Platinum. If she does, we will knock it down and build a park there. It is a safety concern since the buildings are only ten feet apart.”

“Any other rumors?” I asked my bodyguard.

“Nothing confirmed or interesting enough to bother you with. I could use some coin, though. Maybe two gold in silver for bribes,” Bleiz requested. I pulled out twenty large silver and passed it to him.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to….” Bleiz said, standing.

“No, not my style,” I said as he left. Bleiz was asking to hire informants throughout the larger cities. He had a few in Hen’s Hollow and Aegis City to keep an eye on my family, but that was more than enough.

With Bleiz gone I opened three pieces of mail. The first was from Callem asking me to visit with Wynna when I got a chance. He was running the Naval Academy in the capital and was as happy as he had been in the time I knew him. He visited the Shiny Platinum once a week to stay with Wynna and make sure Gareth was not getting rusty.

The second letter was from Selina. Her real name was Sana Velin, and she had taught me spellcraft as a favor to Callem. She was now teaching at the Mage Academy in the capital. She was requesting once again for me to enroll at the Mage Academy. She knew how powerful I was and kept my secret. She would probably spend two or three years teaching before returning to her adventures in the lowlands.

The third letter was a formal request from Admiral Sebastian. He wanted me to travel to Stonefell Island and do the artificing work on three Wasp-class ships. These ships were built in secret by the Triumvirate and the start of hiding the strength of Skyholme Navy. The plan was to open free trade with the lowlands on the capital island and Titan’s Shield, my island. They were worried about spies knowing the Naval strength, so construction efforts were being spread to other islands.

The Naval yard on Stonefell island was the Bricio secret base where they had built skyships and also trained and housed their secret Wolfsguard. Now it was slated to hold twenty-three Wasp-class scouts, the remaining WOlfsguard, and five hundred Navy personnel. I was told in confidence and had the secret landing procedures to enter the mountain where the base was located. I could only take Cilia, Leda, Bleiz, and myself when I traveled there.

The problem I had with this request was there was no payment listed. I had done the work on the Harbingers and dozens of new Wasps already for free. Well, it was supposedly penance for letting Aelyn and her mother escape with the Heart Stone that powered the anti-teleportation defenses of Skyholme. The request was still months out, so I put the letter off to the side.

I also had the ledge from Remy for the delve team, the Shiny Platinum, and my artificing. The delve team was losing 22 gold per week. The Shiny Platinum was making 23 gold per week. A separate line showed the giftshop profit as 54 gold. The gift shop sold sculptures of the beasts in the murals, Callem’s cigars, bottled frost mead, and Tatem’s artwork. All of these were sold on behalf of the artists, and I only received a 20% commission, still 10 gold and 40 silver this week. I also received a payment from the Aethon family of 82 gold this week from light globes and ice cream makers. It was not completely accurate accounting. The delve team supplied the restaurant with a lot of materials for the mead and ale, allowing a larger profit margin. Also, the 82 gold did not include the 20 gold in material cost for the enchanting work.

Still, as long as we ran a surplus, I was happy. As Ullmark trained the dungeon team’s efficiency, the delve team would start to earn more. A note in salaries—shit, Gareth had taken out advanced pay again. Where the hell did all the gold coin go my friend? Maybe he just wanted to pay for his private room at the Dungeon Academy. That would be about five gold…almost six if he hired an attendant.

I knew I was walking a line with my friend. I did pay him well at five gold a week, room, and meals. But he could earn that or more at another dungeon academy. Of course, all the weapons I had made him were worth dozens of platinum coins. That was going to be my next venture, establishing myself as an enchanted weapons broker in the lowlands.

There were a few problems with my plan. First, I was not a skilled merchant. Second, I did not want to paint a target on myself for being known to carry thousands of gold worth of enchanted weapons. Third was the fact I did not need the coin.

I relaxed into my leather sofa. Now all scratched to hell from the cats. Actually, Kiara was learning not to damage the furniture. I think the reasoning was slightly beyond Adrial. I did my aether exercises and fell asleep after making my platinum coins.

My dreams focused on trying to find Aelyn. Was she safe or in trouble? Did she even want to see me again? I dreamt all manner of reunion scenarios. I woke on the couch, and both cats curled into me. I checked my internal clock, and I had about a three-hour nap. I moved to the bedroom after a quick shower and cold soaking. After setting my alarms, the cats joined me as I slept through the night.

I started my new routine. The early morning was tough, but I knew my body would get accustomed after a few days. I finished slightly early and left before the others. I was in the correct lecture hall as the seats began to fill. It was not just mages that were taking the class. A stout young man who smelled like garlic sat to my right. A young woman in leathers sat to my left. She smelled like oiled leather and sweat. I didn’t make an effort to introduce myself. The instructor entered and put three large tomes on the table in front. The middle-aged man waited for the top of the hour before starting.

“Welcome to tier one creatures. I am instructor Mathis. These are the three texts. We will go over some of the lowest-tier and easiest-killed monsters in a dungeon. Just know that anything can kill you if you are not aware. We have one hundred classes. In each class, we will review two creatures. We will spend forty minutes reviewing each and then forty minutes discussing each. We will take a ten-minute break between creatures,” He took a deep breath.

“I suggest you pre-read each monster before class. These books,” he tapped the stack. “Are one gold each for the un-illustrated copy. And twelve gold each for the illustrated copy.” Some groans could be heard. “Do not worry, there are twenty copies of each in the library.” I checked and already had all three volumes of the shelves in my dimensional space. “Now let us begin with the animated horror and giant badger for today…”

I removed the book from my dimensional space. It was not unusual as others were doing it as well. Instructor Mathis was an excellent teacher. I took notes in the margins of my book in a fine script when he said something not mentioned in the text. He was very descriptive and an illusionist as well. He could project illusions of each creature, how it moved, and its relative size. At the end of class, we were given a list of which creatures we would review each day. He was not going alphabetically.

Things were off to a good start, and I already knew I was going to get a lot from the class. Even if I had just read the monster compendium, I would have missed about half of what Mathis taught today. The illusions were extremely helpful as well, I was a visual learner after all.

My second class of the morning was my arcane web class. The Mage teaching this class teaching tissue extraction and levitate in parallel. The ancient-looking woman was Mage Helena. She demonstrated each spell to start the class. And then passed out spell books to any who didn’t have one. Then she spent forty minutes with each spell group. Then those that had learned the spell practiced.

I was slightly disappointed, but then just before class let out, she demonstrated the spells again with her evolutions. The arcane web spell she threw at the wall covered a twenty-by-twenty area, and the web was as thick as my arm. The web also pulsed with a greenish light—yes it was a poison arcane web. The poison was a weak paralytic. It was opening a lot of possibilities for the spell.

I was in the library reading my monster text. My lunch was thick potato wedges with a sour cream and chive dipping sauce. I had grilled chicken as well. I was expecting a grilled chicken salad. I would need to talk with the cook who prepared my meal. I read the two monsters for tomorrow. Two people ate meals at my table, a skinny male with thin black hair and an older woman who wore a guild badge. I didn’t talk with either of them and focused on my reading.

The final class today was Ley Line Theory. There were only fifteen of us in the class. It was not a popular class, but the instructor talked it up as being prepared for the worst-case scenario. Understanding the dungeon could save your life! There were two textbooks for the course, and the instructor wrote one. You could also buy the instructor’s textbook from him for seventy-five silver. Not a bad side hustle if it took him twenty-five silver to make a copy, then he was getting half a gold with every book he sold.

When the class took a break, a few of us went to purchase the book. I paid a gold and got twenty-five silver coins in change and a copy of the book. The cover was soft leather, not hardened leather, probably to save money. I sat in my seat and opened the book. Recognizing the Signs of Dungeon Instability Prior to Evolution. I paused. This was how Callem’s son had died. He had been inside a dungeon when it had evolved.

Looking through the book, I did not have buyer’s regret. This book was not an original work. The instructor had pulled chapters from other books as references. That was probably why he could not sell it openly. This was an excellent reference and would save me time in comparing and contrasting authors’ different viewpoints of authors over thousands of years.

As the class continued a short time later, I realized why it was so undersubscribed. Most of what was being taught was theory. For monster variances, there were seven theories on how the dungeon sapience chose and evolved monsters and animals. As to which methodology was correct was anyone’s guess. Unlike my other two classes, this instructor was a strictly by the book teacher. He just spoon-fed the readings and offered little insights. I figured I could just read the books and not attend the class if it got too boring. I was not going to switch classes.

After class, I wandered the administration building to find Mage Instructor Neelan. His third-floor office was a mess of papers, books, and scrolls. He was sipping a hot beverage and looking out a window at the training year. The fighters were warming up for another class. It was easy to spot the giant Gareth. I interrupted, “Mage Instructor Neelan? Do you have a moment?”

He spun in his swivel chair and faced me. His crystal blue eyes studied me up and down. “Mage Aspirant Storme Hardlight?” He moved a sheet of paper before him. “Although you have learned more than three spells so should be considered a mage. Gregor told me you might seek me out. Is it true you have learned the lesser restoration spell?

It appeared he was prepared for my visit. I nodded, “Yes. I am looking for an advisor. I wanted to see what you could offer in terms of insight.”

Neelan started laughing and went on for some time, “Oh, that is just rich. Instead of me interviewing you, you plan to interview me?” His face was jovial and red from laughing so hard. “Please, sit.” In the mess there was one wooden chair across from his desk. “Now, from what I have here…three tier one spells: cleanliness, mend flesh and alarm, two tier two spells lightning spear and lightning sphere, and now a tier three spell, lesser restoration. And that is only the spells you have disclosed. I am assuming you have the pocket space spell as well as you are not carrying any books.”

 I flushed, a little embarrassed, “That is all correct.”

“What are you doing here, Storme? You should be at the Mage Academy in the capital. Not even fourteen, and you have seven imprinted spells? You are a prodigy. A waste to go devling into dungeons,” he said conversationally.

I went with the truth, “I did not want to be in the crosshairs of the Triumvirate.”

He nodded strongly, “I see. Then I understand your caution.” He stood and watched the clang of steel in the yard below, thinking of a question, “Do you plan to actually delve the dungeons?” He finally asked.

“Yes, I already have been into the Frost Vault,” I answered quickly.

He nodded and turned, “I can not offer you much. You can borrow one book from my personal library at a time—theory or spell. In exchange, you will work three hours a week in the infirmary with me. I will teach you shortcuts to recognize and minimize aether usage to heal injuries.”

He waited for me. “Could the three hours be at the peak time? When most of the serious injuries occur?” I asked.

He laughed softly, “Of course, the only time I am in the infirmary. You may also be called out of class for emergencies once your lesser restoration spell is confirmed.” He considered a moment. “Do you want me to add your sphere affinities to your sheet? Lightning and healing, correct?”

I stumbled for the words, “What? I do not think I mentioned any skill affinities. Are you a reader?”

He smiled conspiratorially, “No, I was just guessing. A tier three healing spell at your age would require some healing affinity to imprint. The lightning was a wild guess as a number of children with your same birthday have recorded some affinity with lightning. The lightning drake attack during the thunderstorm was a memorable event in the islands.”

I was a bit stunned at being read so easily by Neelan. I was too shocked to say, “Another role as an advisor is to help you choose spells. Are you currently in the arcane web class? I would advise some more defensive spells, but I’m not sure how much aether spell matrix you have left. Next year we can talk about it. The arcane web spell can be cast on the ground, creating an impassible barrier for monsters, so it can be considered somewhat defensive.” He smiled brightly, “So, did I pass your interview?”

I liked the insightful man. “Yes, I formally request you as my advisor.”

“Excellent! My residence and private library are in the east tower.” He slid me a key. “On the fifth day you can join me to watch the brutes hack each other to bits after your Dungeon Ley Line Theory class.” I took the key and shook Neelan’s hand. He held it for a moment, “If you are hiding here from the families, I will maintain your secrets.”

For some strange reason, I trusted Neelan. I was hesitant to use my assess person ability on him as he might have a way of detecting it. I left his office and walked back to the Shiny Platinum.

As soon as I entered the entrance from the street for the apartments, I found Cilia waiting for me. She said, “Loriel is in the banquet room in the restaurant.” Her pained look told me she knew I would not be happy. Best to get this over with. I walked to face the de facto ruler of Skyhome.