Chapter 147

Iris got all the Duskhunters settled into their rooms.  Freya and Lorae had met and hit it off.  Lorae communicated with Monty, Freya’s two-hundred-pound shepherd. Lorae told Freya what Monty was thinking—mostly what he wanted to eat.  Freya told me about her afternoon in our suite, “Lorae can talk with them through exchanging images in her mind, Storme!  It was amazing!  I was thinking about learning a spell to do the same thing.”

“Your spell slots are limited, Freya.  Every spell you choose to imprint is permanent.  Once you learn the cleanliness spell, practice it for a few months before choosing your next spell,” I counseled my impulsive sister.

Freya fell onto the pillows on the sofa, “Ugh, you and Sana are the same.  She wants me to learn the privacy spell next.  It is all about spell utility with her. She even gave me a copy of the spellbook.”

Adrial and Kiara were attacking my legs playfully.  They were hungry and wanted to do the training for more food rewards.  “I am going to take care of the cats and then work in my room.”

“Monty is jealous of those two.  Lorae told me.  Monty also thinks finding Bleiz hiding is fun,” Freya was hanging off the sofa.  “Are you going to install showers in the Spire too?  I miss hot showers.”

“Probably not.  The black stone of the tower is indestructible as far as I know.  So I can not run pipes through the floors.” I grinned at my younger sister, “Just learn your cleanliness spell, and you won’t have to take showers,” I advised while feeding the cats.  Monty trotted over, and the cats used their tentacles to prevent him from getting too close to their diner.  I fed Monty, as it looked like Freya was occupied with her thoughts.

I took the cats into my room in the suite and did their reward training. I think Kiara was starting to learn the language, not just commands. For instance, I would say, “Kiara, retrieve the blue pillow with your tentacles.” She would jump on the bed and then bring two different pillows, one in each tentacle. One was light blue, while the other was sky blue. She then looked at me smugly, tilting her head, as if saying, “You didn’t say which blue pillow.”

Adrial, on the other hand, could handle the basic commands, but stringing them in a sentence was a no-go for her. She just got confused. Not surprising since she was just a few months old. With the training done for the night, I let the cats out to play with Monty and Freya while I worked.

I focused on the long curved knives for the Wolfsguard. I finished another twelve before doing all my aether and mind sharpening exercises and proceeded to studying my comprehend languages spell. The cats were on the sofa, and I called them in to sleep on the bed before setting up my privacy and alarm spells.

Freya woke me up and dragged me to breakfast on the fourth floor. She was more excited about the new day than I was. Today was more of a buffet style, and a number of delvers looked exhausted. Talia had been right about three days in a row was too much. At least the Duskhunters could take the middle day if their leadership agreed to the proposal.

I was eating apple pancakes with butter and syrup when Relik and Lorae came up the stairs and sat. The cats immediately gravitated toward Lorae, who ignored them in favor of piling her plate and getting her breakfast. I had sat at the head of the table, and Relik sat next to me.

“Did you discuss the offer with your leadership?” I inquired.

“They agreed to everything in principle. They also want me to take stock of the other dungeons on the islands. So much for a vacation,” he chuckled while trying the pancakes without butter or syrup.

“I will confirm about constructing your guild building near the dungeon today, but I do not foresee any problems,” I told him.

Relik nodded and handed me a pouch, “Eighty tier-four aether crystals. Half is your twenty percent from yesterday’s harvest and the three crystals we owe you for access. The other half is a twenty percent deposit on the twenty-five thousand for the first year of the lease.”

“There are this many tier-four crystals in the Progenitor Dungeon?” I asked, a little shocked, looking into the bag of green crystals.

Relik had a wide smile, “No, I brought those with me. The fire giant on the fifth floor of your dungeon is the final monster. He yielded a tier-four crystal that was twenty units in size. That was the only tier-four stone we found in the entire dungeon. But there are a number of other harvestables that will sell well for us in Llorth and other cities. The artificed items in the reward chests are unique as well. As I said, it is a profitable dungeon.”

“They are all different comfort items from what I know,” I said, and Relik nodded. I would just have to trust his team to prepare the delving guide for me. “Would you be open to training some of my delvers with yours?”

The table suddenly got quiet as Duskhunters and Shiny Platinum members waited to hear Relik’s reply, “Outside the dungeon, we can mix the prep training. I do not want anyone on my team to be responsible for charges inside the dungeon that are not part of the Duskhunters.”

“Understandable,” I stood. “I hope this partnership lasts for a long time.” He stood, and we shook wrists. Now, I had to get permission from Loriel to house a foreign guild on my estate.

I left the Spire and went to the skyship cradles as the Wolfsguard were practicing in the air on the Sky Wraith. The work on the barracks was coming along rapidly, and Isla was here early this morning. She was probably not going to like what I was going to say. She smiled as I approached, “Storme, I am rushing this as fast as I can. Since I kicked the Wolfsguard out of the Spire, I want them to be comfortable sooner, rather than later.”

“I want to make some changes,” I started to her immediate frown.

“Storme, the guests are coming for the party, and I don’t know if I can…” I held up my hand to stop her. I had us walk over to the architectural drawings. They were simple. A large common floor, and the second floor was ten bunk rooms with ten beds each.

“I want to add a large pond here. A single dock bisecting it, so two skyships can land. For the barracks…” I studied it for a moment. “I want to turn this large common room into a tavern. So just add a stone building at the back…here.” I spent some time sketching it out. “The kitchen will function like the Shiny Platinum. This is so the Navy crews that arrive on the skyships I am refurbishing have somewhere to go and relax.”

Isla frowned at my inexpert marks on her plans. She eventually nodded, “Ok, I understand. So your guards and the Navy have a place to interact and drink together? I suppose you want me to hire staff for the restaurant, too?” She sounded a little frustrated—or maybe overwhelmed.

“Remy can handle the staff. Maybe take a few from the Shiny Platinum to get it started. I will do all the artificing, and I plan to give them communal showers in this room,” I marked the bathrooms on the plans. I made a few more changes as Isla frowned. When I was done making a dozen small changes, I told her, “Double your weekly salary. You deserve it.” I do not think that made her any happier.

I left Isla to go and talk with Pakkam as the Sky Wraith was landing from its training. I boarded the ship to find the Wolfsguard, old and young, moving vibrantly on the deck. I gave Pakkam the twenty-eight completed long curved daggers and told him he could hand them out to whom he saw fit. I would have the rest eventually.

Pakkam was optimistic about being ready for action but had one problem, “We can fire the aether cannons, but we could really use some mages for defense and offense.”

Skyship mages were a totally different class of mage. They were specialist like the wind mages of the Principality of Marstom. I couldn’t just put my delve mages on board. They might do well in shipboard actions, but in skyship ranged combat, they would be useless. “I will see what I can do. Hopefully, I will be available if any attack comes.”

“Sphere willing you are, High Mage,” Pakkam nodded and took the blades to an eager crowd of Wolfsguard.

My next task for the day was to talk with Loriel. I boarded the Maelstrom to find the Princess talking with Cilia on the bridge. They stopped talking, but Princess Amelia had a smile plastered on her face. “I need to go to the Citadel,” I told Cilia.

“I was planning to go there as well!” The Princess said happily. “I can get my guards, and we can go together.” I assumed she had been waiting here and would have been going wherever I decided.

“I am leaving now. Cilia can come back and pick you up, Princess.” Her frown appeared at my words, but she walked off the ship after saying a brief farewell.

It was just a minute’s flight to the Citadel. Cilia asked, “Why do you keep pushing women away? Is it because of Aelyn?”

I was quiet and thinking, and Cilia landed the Maelstrom. She thought I was not going to answer, but I did. “Partly. Aelyn did not betray me, but it feels like she did. She used me to get her mother to freedom. So whenever I think a woman is using me to further themselves, I put up my defenses.”

Cilia nodded in understanding. “Just don’t push everyone away, Storme,” she said with a half smile.

I paused and returned the smile, “Thank you for the advice, Cilia.”

The Citadel was bustling with preparations for opening trade and increasing defensive measures for the Black Mauraders attack. “High Mage,” a man in the captain’s uniform approached. “Captain Dylan. I can escort you to your destination.”

“I am here to see Loriel Miaden of the Triumvirate ruling council,” I replied.

“They are in session, but I will escort you to a waiting room and inform her. What is the topic you wish to confer with her on?” The captain said while falling in step beside me.

“Personal matter,” I replied, not wanting to explain.

As we walked, the middle-aged man in the captain’s uniform said, “Your efforts to heal the people have not gone unnoticed, High Mage. My grandfather has a new set of teeth, and my mother walks without a limp now. I have a cousin waiting in Aegis City for your next session. She lost a child in birth and has terrible pain.”

That was expertly done. He had praised me and then tried to guilt me into going to help his cousin. It worked, “I will be stopping at the Shiny Platinum after talking with Loriel. Hopefully, she can catch me while I am healing. I only plan to be around for a few hours.” He nodded curtly and left me in a small waiting room. A servant in Miaden colors came and left me cold drinks and an array of cheeses and breads.

It was only thirty minutes before Loriel came into the room, “When I was told the High Mage had requested my time, I did not think it was you, Storme!” She laughed, “You coming to me for something is a first. Unless I have done something else to anger you?”

“Yes, well, I have mostly questions today,” I said, already wondering how she was going to leverage the meeting. “The portal to Goldreach next to the Shiny Platinum—is it functional?”

“Three more days. If you are concerned about that, I have twenty-six soldiers and two mages stationed nearby. There will be no surprise attack coming from the Sadians, and we have a disruption rune we can activate at any time.” Loriel noted while pouring herself a drink.

“When will I start receiving a return on my investment?” I asked, sipping my own drink. I had paid for the small building to house the special portal that was there to give the Sadian Emperor rapid exchange of goods and probably something else Loriel was not letting me know.

“Maybe a year to recover your cost. I hear you have no need of coin. The High Mage just purchased four warehouses in Solaris City. You have the two most valuable skyships in all of Skyholme and more Wolfsguard at your command than anyone in the Citadel,” she smiled at me while drinking.

“And more has been asked of me than any other in Skyholme. We never discussed compensation for the two Harbingers I worked on three days ago for Sebastian,” I replied.

“What do you want this time? Another day in the dungeon?” Loriel responded a little tersely.

“I have hired Adventurers to help defend the Black Spire in the coming attack. I had to permit them to build a residence on my estate. What paperwork do I need to fill out?” I asked Loriel. I was not going to detail my contract with the Duskhunters as she might want a piece of it for herself or Skyholme.

“The estate is deeded to you for as long as you are High Mage. As per our agreement, the Triumvirate will tax any new buildings at normal rates. You are given credit towards those taxes for your work on the Skyholme fleet.” She put down her drink, “You have already paid decades of taxes in advance for your work. A few new buildings will not alter much.”

A knock came at the door. “Enter!” Loriel barked impatiently. The door swung open, and Princess Amelia walked in.

Princess Amelia smiled, “Looks like we were going to the same place after all! You could have waited for me.” Her tone was playful, like she didn’t mind me ditching her.

Having the Princess here was a minor annoyance. I turned to Loriel to finish this, “So the Duskhunters can build a residence on my estate. What happens if I am no longer in charge of the estate? I am making an annual renewable contract with them. Would you ensure the contract would be honored for the current year?”

“You got the Duskhunters to set up a residence in Skyholme?” Amelia turned to Loriel, “You should do whatever it takes to keep them happy. The Duskhunters are one of the top dungeon guilds in forty thousand miles.”

Loriel seemed to think, “The Progenitor Dungeon is not the best dungeon in Skyholme. Maybe they would be interested in a residence near the Fiery Descent or Ogre’s Castle dungeons?”

“Are you trying to poach the Duskhunters?” I asked Loriel levely. “They are mostly dark elves, and I have worked hard to establish a mutually beneficial relationship with them.”

Loriel seemed to think of something, “They are delving during your three days’ access to the dungeon and not paying for access?” She dismissed it, “Fine. You can have your dungeon guild. I will add the addendum to your ownership of the Black Spire Estate.”

I waited, but she did not add any conditions as I expected. “Thank you, Loriel.”

“Oh, one thing,” Loriel said, and I waited patiently for the request I knew was coming, just delayed. “The guest list for the party you are hosting has expanded some. Besides Princess Amelia, there will be thirty-nine more attendees. I will send Isla the list and requirements.”

“I am sure she will be happy to receive them,” I smiled and excused myself. The Princess could find her own way back to the Spire.

I took the Maelstrom to the Shiny Platinum; over two hundred people were waiting for the High Mage’s free healing. The captain’s cousin was among them. It was a useful stop as I used more aether than required, pushing lesser restoration to level twenty-two. Just one last level for the final evolution to regrow limbs.

Remy was at the Shiny Platinum, and after I finished healing, he told me, “You know, besides making yourself the most popular person in Skyholme, you have made your restaurant the busiest and most successful on the islands. We opened the function room to regular patrons and still have lines out the door.”

“That is all good. We are opening another restaurant at the Black Spire. Well, more of a tavern being built into the barracks. Remy, hire staff and start working out supply chain logistics. Ask the Wolfsguard what they want to eat. The guards will not be charged, but visitors from the Wolfsguard town and Navy will be,” Remy nodded, somewhat excited for a new challenge.

“What about the runes for the one-person skyship?” He asked.

“I will find time to work on them after the Black Mauraders are handled. With the Duskhunters guarding the tower, I am confident in the safety of those staying there. I am going to stay here tonight and work on protection artifacts for my parents and brother.”

I locked myself in my apartment with the cats at the Shiny Platinum for more than a day to work on the rings in peace. I set up the privacy spell, and arcane locks so I would not be disturbed. Remy was only to use the communication stone if it was an emergency. Each ring took under two hours, even with my metal shaping, but I now had plenty of tier-four stones to complete. My parents, Pascal, Mia, and the two guards across the hall from my parents each got the shield and hardened skin rings. I had a pair for Freya and Pakkam as well. My father also got an artificed long sword with the hardness and sharpness runic patterns.

I would have preferred he was not in one of the most dangerous places during an attack, but his job was on the docks, and he was stubborn and would not leave his post. The Sadians almost always attacked the skyship docks, and I assumed the Black Mauraders would do the same. The warehouse that I made into the Shiny Platinum had been damaged in the last Sadian attack.

Before returning to the Black Spire, I healed another forty men, women, and children. Every person I healed got me closer to the last evolution. At the Spire, I met with Relik to finalize our contract.

We both signed, and it would be filed with the Adventurer’s Guild. My penalty for breaking the contract was a return of twenty-five thousand gold and the cost of building the Guild Residence. He would owe one hundred thousand gold if he broke the contract. The only way the Duskhunters could violate the contract was if they failed to give me twenty percent of the value of their harvest. Since I did not monitor them, it would be hard to prove either way.

Isla had reworked the plans for the skyship cradle barracks and had already had the pond excavated. A water mage was filling it now. This would allow for more skyships with hulls designed for water to land at the Spire.

Pakkam and Freya received their protective rings. Pakkam moved his feather fall ring to a chain around his neck. If he needed it, he could put it on. Over the next three days, I worked on the weapons for the Wolfsguard. I thought strongly about racing with the Maelstrom to complete the request for the Elven King’s adamantine sword, but there were too many unknowns. The first of which was when the Mauraders were going to attack.

Freya and Lorae became good friends and usually took care of the cats during the day. The cats preferred running outside and hunting to watching me shape metal and write runes anyway.

I was working on the runes for the feather fall rings I planned to give the Wolfsguard on the Sky Wraith when Isla found me, “Storme, you look a mess. You do realize your guests will be arriving in six hours.”

“Not my guests, Loriel’s,” I waved her off.

“You are hosting, and they expect you there. Relik and his team are attending, as well as all of your delvers,” she tried to motivate me.

“I am going. I just want to finish this new design,” I said, studying the runes I had just written out for the feather fall ring on paper. I think I had finally found an identity on how I wanted my runic work to look unique.