Chapter 142

The twin’s fourteenth celebration had been fun.  They both marveled at the necklaces I had made them.  They probably did not fathom how small I had to make the runes on those pendants—almost as good as dungeon work.  It was some of my best enchanting work.  I snuck away shortly after escorting Mera.  I had too much to do before we left for the lowlands to scout for the pirates.

I was working on making enchanted weapons for the Wolfsguard, who Pakkam selected to accompany me.  Every Wolfsguard was getting the same curved dagger that Bleiz preferred.  I gave the daggers a sharpness enchantment, and they were all identical, with a green tier four aether at the base of the grip.  It was a much larger stone than needed, but I had used mithril in the runes so that they could be overcharged with the more powerful stone.

All the Wolfsguard who were guarding my Black Spire were from the Blackguard. The Blackguard were the unaffiliated Wolfsguard who had been tasked with guarding Skyhold. The primary weapon of Blackguard had been a simple longsword.  It was a little heavier than normal long swords as the strength and speed of the Wolfsguard meant it needed added durability.  The two enchantments I gave the ten long blades were durability and counter.  Counter was a simple enchantment that caused a rebound when the blade was struck.

With their style of fighting, it made the most sense.  It would halt the momentum of an attack and give an immediate opening to exploit for the fast reactions of the Wolfsguard.  I used tier-four green crystals to power these enchantments as well.  Most likely, they would have to be recharged between engagements as the counter enchantment drew a lot of aether from the aether stone.

Bleiz entered my small cabin while I worked.  Adrian and Kiara were angry as they had not sensed him approaching the door and failed in their sentry duty.  Bleiz sat on the small bed while I worked on the blades at my desk, “You need to tell that one to find another.”

“She already knows,” I replied offhandedly, focusing on the detailed runic work.

“She does not know.  She would be happy being your secret mistress if you are so inclined.” Bleiz stated while wrestling Adrial with his hand on the bed.

“I will deal with it when we return,” I stated, focusing on the blades.  “Go tell Cilia to take me to the Spire.  She can come back to the party after she drops us off.”

Bleiz rose, and Kiara leaped onto his back in a surprise assault, digging her claws in to hold on.  I snapped my finger, and she dropped to the floor, realizing her playing had crossed a line.  Bleiz left smiling at the cat’s antics, probably plotting revenge.

Cilia arrived, and it was not long after we were flying to the Black Spire. I locked the cats in my cabin and let Cilia know they were in there. We landed at the gates, and I found four Wolfsguards standing at attention outside the entrance as I descended the ramp of the Maelstrom.  They nodded as I passed inside and made my way up to the fourth floor.  The Wolfsfuard had cots up here lined along the glass windows.  The room smelled like wet dog but was extremely ordered. Pakkam arrived and came to talk with me.

“High Mage, do you require an escort to the dungeon?” Pankkam asked and Bleiz snorted.

“No, just the pairs going in can come with me.  The delvers will be arriving after six hours, so that is as much time as you will have to…” I cleared my throat.  “Bleiz and I will be going in with the first group to delve into the dungeon for some practice.”

“We are?” Bleiz asked skeptically.

“I mentioned it?”  I smirked.  I addressed Pakkam,  “Pakkam, I have some blades for those who you selected to come on the pirate raid.”

As I pulled the blades and curved daggers from my dimensional closet, the thirty or so Wolfsguard took notice.  I had them all surround me, picking up the long swords and testing them with a swing.  One of the smaller females gripped, “Dragon shit, if I had known we would get fancy weapons, I would have volunteered.”

A large Wolfguard wrapped his arm around her, “After the delve, you will have something else more important to protect.”  It was a little awkward seeing affection from a Wolfsguard couple.  I was not the only one, either.  The other Wolfsguard looked away from the public display.  I thought it was good that this couple was comfortable enough to break the engrained training.

After the awkward moment, Pakkam addressed me, “This is very generous for you to loan us these weapons, High Mage.  We will use them with great care.”

“You misunderstand.  These are for you to keep.  Remy should also have a crate with potion belts filled with lesser-healing potions.  They were made in the capital, and I will get higher-quality brews the next time we are in Lloth, as promised.  The trip to Llorth is too far out of our way when we go and scout the mountains for pirate activity.”

The blades were sorted to the ten who were coming with us. The curved daggers I had made fit well in their sheaths, but the long swords rattled as they were slightly smaller than their normal long swords.  Pakkam and two others already had artificed blades from their time in the Blackguard.  My enchanted blades were superior, so they handed down their old blades to others.

Seeing the envy of the Wolfsguard not receiving the pair of weapons, I announced, “When I have time, everyone will get the same blade.”  This got a lot of appreciated nods and wolfish smiles.  Iris chose this time to walk in.  I thought she had been at the party with everyone else as she was friends with the twins.

“Storme!  If you are giving away valuables, then I could use some coin,” she smiled devilishly.

“Isla, I assume you are here looking for me for a reason?”  I asked the architect.

“Coin, Storme. I always need more coin,” she said with a smile. She bit her lip and added, “Loriel wanted to host a party here,” she pointed at the large room we currently stood in, “to celebrate open trade between the Sadians and Skyholme.  She thought you might be more receptive if I asked instead of her.” Isla smiled hopefully, but she was expecting my reply to be a resounding no.

“Why?  Is the Citadel in Skyhold not good enough?”  I said calmly.

“This is for the skyship captains.  Well, mostly skyship captions and a few heads of merchant houses from Skyholme and the Sadians.  There shouldn’t be more than one hundred guests,” Isla explained. “Loriel wanted to bring them into a more intimate environment with the best view around,” she indicated, the large glass windows on this floor.

Isla continued, “She told me that she was going to make trade offers to this select group and wanted you to be privy to them in case you wanted to take advantage of the opportunities presented.” I had three weeks to make good on presenting a skyship and having fifty guards at the Black Spire. If I failed, then Loriel had her own skyship stationed her with her guards. Hosting an event would put pressure on me to make good on the contract as quickly as possible.

I considered the request, and Loriel was open about it. Even offering me an opportunity to be part of her machinations for profit. “How much is the party going to cost me?” I asked, doubting Loriel was going to pay for it.

Isla smiled, “Loriel will handle getting the selected participants to the Black Spire. You will be responsible for hosting.” I rolled my eyes at Isla, “Food, staff, guards—if you are using the Wolfsguard, then you should probably get house uniforms and have them dress alike.”

“How much?” I asked again.

Isla conceded, “If you want to impress three thousand. If you just want to do the minimum, a thousand gold will cover it.”

Working with Loriel was a very expensive proposition. I checked my dimensional closet, and I had six large platinum and thirty-three small platinum, a total of nine thousand gold. But this was the platinum I had created to keep construction going while I was off pirate hunting. I figured I was going to be gone for at least four days. I was going into the dungeon with Bleiz, so I did not want to burn aether making more platinum right now.

“Fine. You can arrange things and work with the Wolfsguard to get them uniforms and for security. I will give you the three thousand gold for one party.” That was a ridiculous sum, “Please get Remy an accounting of the expenses. I will give you another five thousand for construction. I know it is less than I promised for this week,” I held up my hand. “I am giving you another one thousand gold to be used as needed.” For some reason, it felt like I was keeping the Skyholme economy afloat.

“The portal warehouse is not going to be finished before they open Skyholme to trading in three weeks,” I waved off her concern. She was referring to the portal building adjacent to the Shiny Platinum and connected directly to the Goldreach, the Sadian Capital. Loriel just needed it built, but not before trade opened.

Isla pulled out some documents, “I also have locked in six warehouses in Solaris City like you wanted.  I have rental deeds with the right to purchase, each is between ten thousand and twelve thousand gold.  All but one is empty.”

I took the documents, and they were all between 125 and 140 gold monthly rent.  The one warehouse that was not empty had cornmeal.  I held up that one, requesting an explanation, “Six hundred bags of cornmeal,” Isla explained.  “No one wants to purchase it, and the last renter abandoned it. It was to ship to farms as animal feed.”

“Have it shipped to the Shiny Platinum; if it is in good shape, I can make tortilla chips with it.  If it is moldy or vermin-infested, just dump it. Tell Remy about these warehouses, and we will try to buy one every month.  They can not sell them, right?”  I inquired as I did not want to read through the contract myself.

“As long as we pay the monthly fee, we have first right of purchase at that noted price for twenty-three days once they inform us they have a buyer,” she pointed at the document I was holding.  I nodded and considered. My guess is once the trade opens in three weeks, more funds will flow into Skyholme. Then, every warehouse in the islands would be snatched up. So, I had to come up with another seventy thousand gold to secure the warehouses. It was hard to believe that two years of a single gold was so valuable to me.

“Isla, find someone to manage the warehouses. We will sublet the space, though I doubt there will be any takers until trade opens,” Isla had a sour face at the assignment. Maybe I was putting too much on her. “Fine, tell Remy to handle it. Is that all?”

Isla nodded slowly, “Yes. I made some changes to the Wolfsguard village, but I do not need to bother you about it. It is only adding a few hundred gold to the construction.”

“Was it necessary?” I asked.

“A school and two more residential buildings at the request of the wolfkin, Jaesmin,” Isla commented. I nodded and figured the Wolfsguard could govern themselves. After they established their community, they would be responsible for funding further expansion using the funds I paid them to work the land and guard the Black Spire.

“That is fine then. Pakkam, I am leaving for the dungeon. Bleiz, are you ready?”

We arrived at the dungeon entrance, and the guards were quite shocked to see a dozen Wolfsguard with me. No one had told them about my plan. One guard stepped forward, “High Mage, Wolfsguard are not allowed inside dungeons.”

“You need to leave. My deal with the Triumvirate is I have unfettered access to the dungeon for one day. Talk with Loriel Miaden if there is an issue,” my tone was cordial.

The guard did not know what to do before slowly nodding, “We will return to our posts in a day then. And thank you for curing my niece, High Mage. My sister was overjoyed.” The guards left us at the dungeon entrance.

“Pakkam, Bleiz, and I are going to make our way to the second level. You can send four in with us and then can rotate till you are finished. The delve teams will arrive in about hours to start their harvesting. The monsters are simple blink bunnies and uni-horn goats. You can take whatever you kill with you.” I had no worries the Wolfguard would be safe with the simple tier one monsters.

Pakkam nodded, “Thank you. You are most generous, High Mage.” He fingered his new sword on his hip, and I guessed he planned to try it out.

I checked the entrance, ensured no one was in the dungeon, and then entered with Bleiz. We quickly made our way to the hippogriff. We left a slaughter in our wake, and I think Bleiz was enjoying himself. The blink bunnies traveled in a straight line after their short-range teleport, so you could easily move out of their line and cut them as they reappeared. I did not have this practice on my first time as Delphia could pick them up before they attacked. The unihorn goats also charged straight ahead. We quickly arrived at the hill where the floor challenge monster waited.

Beliz was responsible for covering me from the rushing rabbits while I fought the hippogriff. This time, I managed to lure it down and entangle it in the arcane web. The strands were much stronger, and the hippogriff struggled to break the strands. I let Bleiz finish it off.

Bleiz commented, “This was fairly easy.”

I nodded, “It is a good training dungeon, I suppose. The next level has blink dogs and stone-throwing kobolds. It is a great place for me to practice my exchange ability.” The reward chest had a few coins and a belt. Since this dungeon gave out comfort items, I let Bleiz keep it. I did not recognize the runic pattern, so he could get it identified in a city.

We went down the stairs to the orchard level. We rushed to give the Wolfsguard as much time as possible on the first floor to conceive in the dungeon. “Are you jealous?” I asked as we walked the perimeter of the orchard, luring out two to three blink dogs at a time. I was still using my arcane web spell to level it up. I had to cast it twice as the dogs were able to use their blink ability to free themselves.

“Jealous of what they are doing on the first floor?” I nodded. “No. But you must be if you are asking,” he added with a grin. I just grunted and ended the conversation.

The kobolds arrived in two to four at a time, and I practiced my exchange ability as planned as we moved deeper into the orchard to locate the monster at the center. The orchard had a large clearing at the center with a massive raised stone. On the stone was the owl bear. The body of a dark gray bear, muscles evident, and a massive owl head. The owl head followed us as we circled in the trees.

I spoke as we walked cautiously, “Owl bears are fearsome, much stronger than you would guess. They will wrap you in a hug and then use their beak to remove your head. I will try to ensnare it in the arcane web, and we will attack at range.”

Bleiz said, “The creature looks huge.” And to emphasize his point, the monster stood on its hind legs and towered over nine feet. Its muscled body rippled under its gray fur.

“It will not attack unless we move into the clearing,” I said. I will distract it. I had my lightning reflexes active and moved quickly to the right. The owlbear charged me, and the first arcane web barely slowed it.

I switched to lightning spear, burning holes in its fur as I frustrated the beast. The ground rumbled under my feet as it pursued me. I just needed to be careful and not lead it near Bleiz. Bleiz only had his throwing blades and was already out, with them sticking in the monster’s hide. I tried lightning sphere to try and stun it, but it had no effect. It also crashed through aether shields with barely a pause.

I soon found my best way to deal with the owl bear was to cast arcane web on the ground in its path. The owlbear was able to break through, but enough of the webbing stuck that it slowly built up after multiple castings to effectively slow the creature. For a normal mage casting ten arcane webs would be a huge aether investment in this one fight. For me, it was nothing.

I brought out my falchion and attacked, causing a large slash in the side. The owl bear had a piercing shriek in anger at its predicament. Bleiz attacked the other side, and when he retreated, I attacked. We repeated this in between additional arcane web spells until the owlbear bled out. Bleiz was breathing heavily as we stood over the corpse.

“Your web is like a rope. One strand is weak and easily broken. Wrap a few together, and they can hold a man’s weight,” Bleiz said as the arcane web dissolved to reveal the mutilated creature. “Are we going to harvest this one?”

“No. That fight was more difficult than I thought it would be. The next level is a long sandy beach with giant crabs and water elementals,” I said, looking at Bleiz.

“I would prefer not to get sand in my fur,” Bleiz said sardonically.

“You have the cleanliness spell, Bleiz. But I am guessing you are telling me you do not wish to proceed?” I replied to the Wolfsguard.

“I think you are formidable, Storme. But this creature could have easily killed you if it caught you. I think you need to rethink traveling dungeons with just the two of us,” Bleiz lectured me.

“Fine, we will not go to the third level,” I looked over at the steps that had formed going down and the small reward chest nearby. “Let me keep practicing my exchange ability and leveling our spells against the dogs and kobolds.” I opened the chest and handed it to him. It was just some coins and a large wooden bowl. The wooden bowl was extremely light and had familiar runic markings. It could heat the contents inside. It is an excellent tool for the traveling adventurer who likes to cook. I took the bowl, and Bleiz took the coin.

We spent three hours going through the orchards and training. Bleiz even tried one of the vinegar apples and quickly spit it out. We circled around to the gate and exited the dungeon. The delve team had already sent their first group in, and the Wolfsguard had returned to the Black Spire. The Maelstrom was nearby, and we boarded to find the rest of the delve team waiting their turn.

I sent Bleiz to get the ten Wolfsguard making the pirate hunt and talked to Cesar and Hadrian, two large young men who wielded mauls. They were still up for coming with us on the pirate hunt. Talia, Delphia, and Namira were in the first dungeon team currently harvesting. Sammie and Lana were off delivering a load of aetheric soil to the farms and would be back shortly.

I waited in my cabin for everyone to board so we could leave. The cats were upset I had left them, but they were still too small to join me in a dungeon. I rested while the ten Wolfguard arrived and the rest of the team finished their delve.

Talia decided Sabina would lead the next delve with the remaining team members. The Maelstromp was full of twenty-one people and the two cats as we lifted off and headed for the lowlands to find pirates.

6th day dungeon

7th day pirate hunting

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