Chapter 104

The tall, muscular dark elf stood in front of four other male dark elves. A sixth dark elf, who was a small woman, was circling the Maelstrom. My eyes focused on the lead elf. He was thick with muscles and had a sword that looked too big on his back. His face was hard, and his eyes told me he was extremely unhappy. Unfortunately, Gareth, who had come down the ramp with me, was the one who spoke first.

“How the demon’s dick do you draw that monstrosity on your back?” Gareth’s tone was such that I knew he was trying to break the tension, but his intervention was not welcome. This group of dark elves was probably a top delve team at one of the greatest dungeons in fifty thousand miles.

The elf focused his eyes off of Lorae and onto Gareth. “Human, you should never ask how a man handles his sword. Especially when yours is so much smaller.”

“Well, if you want to compare swords,” Gareth drew the broadsword I had made him and held it unthreateningly with two hands. Relik reached back and took the handle of his blade. It appeared the sheath disappeared when he gripped the hilt allowing him to pull the massive blade free in a smooth motion.

Gareth looked over at me as Relik slowly lowered the tip of his five-foot-long blade to the ground. “Storme, I want one of those. The disappearing sheath as well.” I rolled my eyes at my friend.

Relik smirked and lightened his tone, “You may be a big boy, but it takes more than a big frame to wield something this immense.” Gareth’s banter had succeeded as the tension of the encounter was completely dissipated.

“Father, stop playing around. Your macho innuendo is not needed. I was just here to look at some kittens. I am fine, and you told me you were no longer tracking me!” Lorae had a scolding tone, and her father winced slightly.

One of the dark elves stepped forward and whispered something into Relik Lordae’s ear. He nodded slightly and said, “You should know better than to board strange skyships, Lorae. We can discuss this privately, Lorae.”

“Since you tracked me again and broke your promise, I want a gift,” Lorae said smartly. “I want you to buy me the two kittens on the ship.”

Relik frowned, “We talked about this. No pets until you finish all of your apprenticeships. You may wish to be a tamer, but you can not decide for yourself until your 70th birthday.” He put his sword on his back, “I do not think we should do this in front of strangers.” His team behind him relaxed, not seeing a threat. The small dark elf woman who had been circling suddenly drew her blade, rising the tension again.

Bleiz appeared, showing his hands non-threateningly. That was telling. The elf was sharp enough to pierce the tier 3 invisibility necklace. These were scary and strong elves.

I interjected, “It is not nice to be sneaking around our ship.” The elf woman looked to Relik, who nodded, and she sheathed her blade and returned to his group.

Lorlae seemed agitated, “Fine! But I want an owlbear cub for my 60th birthday.” She looked back up the ramp into the Maelstrom, “And two displacer beast kittens as well. And I want the animal empathy dungeon essence.”

Relik nodded, agreeing, but I sensed he was humoring her. Lorae’s demeanor had changed from being a responsible young adult to a spoiled teenager in a few moments. My impression of her had fallen greatly. That was until I saw her face when she turned around momentarily. She winked at me and had amusement written all over her face telling me she was not being completely serious.

Relik walked to me as Lorae mingled with his party. “I am sorry about my daughter. She is still young and needs guidance.” He whispered, “I am glad she was safe when we got here. The last time I accidentally killed seven orcs, she was dicing within the lower city.” That was definitely a threat to leave his daughter alone as he spun and joined his party.

Gareth had overheard the message and slapped me on my shoulder. “Damn, Stormy, you always go after the ones that are hard to get. You do know there are tons of brothels in the city.” Relik was only twenty feet away and paused his step.

Damn Gareth’s humor. “I never have and never will visit a brothel, Gareth. That is unless it is to drag your idiot self out of one.” I walked up the ramp before my on-track-mind friend could make things worse.

“Raise the ramp and get ready to lift off,” I announced throughout the second deck.

I went to my cabin and checked on the beasts. The white one, Kiara, watched me enter, interested. The black one was sleeping. I needed to name the black one. Maybe, Adriel. I tested the name on my tongue. Kiara seemed interested in the name. “You are Kiara. Your sister is Adrial,” I announced. Kiara seemed to lose interest, probably because I was not preparing food.

I took out the book on raising displacer beasts and went to the bridge. That was a good thing about magic. The only thing you really needed to check was how much charge your aether crystal had, and then you could take off.

I sat in one of the three chairs on the bridge, paging through the book as Cilia and Leda got the Maelstrom airborne and away from the dangers of the Llorth defenses. There was a lot more involved than I thought. I noticed that Leda had purchased a book called, Navigating the Skies Within the Sphere. Since Skyholme was so insulated, the generally accepted rules elsewhere were different.

The city of Llorth was an experience beyond imagining, and we had only scratched the surface in the day we were here.  It showed me how small Skyholme actually was in the Sphere.  I was still marking pages when Leda, as Cilia had gotten the ship on course to Skyholme, and the controls were locked.  I was just here to pilot in case of an emergency to let Cilia rest.

“I will watch while you two get some rest,” I announced. Cilia gratefully left, but Leda took her new book and began to read.

After a while, she put down the book, “Storme, that was incredible.  We walked into the trade district, and there were so many things I never dreamed of there.  I am glad you let us into our crew.”

I was silent for a few minutes, “Are you going to report everything we did to Loriel?”  I watched Leda’s face as it slowly turned red.

“It is not what you think, Storme.  We are loyal to you.  What we tell her is for the benefit of Skyholme.  Your family still lives there. You have to understand that,” Leda said trying to reason with me. It was no secret that I still harbored a grudge against Loriel.

I pretended to think before saying, “I need you to approach Loriel and see if she knows where Aelyn and her mother went.”

“So you didn’t find any clues in the city? You were gone for hours—I thought you found something, especially after you brought the dark elf girl on board,” Leda relaxed.

I looked out the bridge window at the lands racing by below us, “No. I found nothing other than confirming they did not arrive here when they used the portal stone. I was told golden-haired elves were rare and easily noticeable in Llorth. No one arrived at the time they used the stones. So will you do it? Ask Loriel for me?”

Leda didn’t hesitate, “Cilia and I will both ask her together after we give her our report. She will tell us what she knows. I promise.”

“What are you going to tell Loriel specifically?” I asked, focusing on her again.

Leda stumbled over her words, “Loriel, she is still very much interested in you as an ally. She just wants to know where you are going and what you are doing and if she can step in and help.”

“So I can be indebted to her?” I harumphed. “No, that is not going to happen.”

Leda nodded, “We will ask her as a favor to us and not from you.”

I felt a little guilty manipulating Leda like this. I was using her as a pawn to get the information I wanted. I was a hypocrite, which was why I disliked Loriel so much. At least with my request, I was not putting Leda in any danger.

Leda left to rest in her cabin, and I returned to the book while watching the navigation screen for dangers. I was learning a lot about displacer beasts. Maybe it was my own hubris, but I thought I could train them. Dar the Beastmaster, laid out a very clear set of instructions for gaining the trust of the newborns.

I found a lot of useful information on what to feed them and what not to feed them. The biggest no-no was the flesh of their parents. I still had those cuts of meat from harvesting the bodies, so I planned to get rid of it as soon as possible. It was a delicacy, and I noticed a handful of recipes in the other books when I paged through them. The most important part of the early bonding process was feeding them plenty of food. Their disposition could quickly become feral if they were constantly hungry or competing for food.

As the hours turned, I began to get sleepy, and Remy came to relieve me of the watch. I really needed to add more experienced crew for the little Maelstrom. Leda and Cilia might not remain with me long-term.

The Maelstrom reached the Skyholme islands, and Remy called everyone to the bridge. We had only been gone a few days, but it felt like months as Cilia swung the ship into the hangar. As we descended the ramp, Rippon stood there, “What the in the twenty-three furies did you do her of your first trip? Where is the strut?”

Rippon sounded like he was a concerned father confronting someone who had just brought his daughter home after midnight. I answered him, “A mountain troll tried to use the Maelstrom like a club. We did not appreciate it and decided to drop him off.” I patted him on the shoulder and went into the kitchen. Remy and Gareth could detail our adventures better than I.

I filled up my dimensional space with enough food to feed Adrial and Kiara for a month. I then returned to take their two crates to our room. I took Kiara’s first and placed it in the bedroom in front of the window. She did not attack me and just sat facing forward as I carried her—like a princess. When I returned for Adrial, she was extremely agitated that her sister was gone and lashed out from the bars at me. I created more bars so she could no longer reach through them and carried her up to the room as well.

I healed some minor scratches from Adrial and fed them until their bellies were bloated. That was what the book had said. Feed them until they pass out in a food coma. I looked around the room and decided to redecorate a little to make it more beast friendly. I think Kiara had convinced me. I would try to raise them, but Bleiz was right—I was a dog person.

I started to think about how big the cats were going to get. If their parents were any indication, then I would remodel parts of the third floor. The stairs were already wide enough, but the doors needed to be wider. They could use the guest room to lair in. I planned to take them with me so they could remain on board and guard the Maelstrom. While they were in the Shiny Platinum, they could guard my family if they were trained enough. That meant that Freya and my parents would have to become comfortable around the beasts, and Kiara and Adrial would have to listen to them. That meant Freya would have to be part of the training process.

I pulled out some artificing books on making pet collars. Most of the enchantments were for locating lost pets and obedience training. Dar suggested only using positive reinforcement. He suggested that any training using pain or discipline was less effective at generating loyalty from the displacer beasts. My bedroom door opened, and I spun to see Freya rushing at me for a hug.

“Storme! I saw the skyship landing from Madame Culthrie’s. I rushed home right away,” Freya started bouncing excitedly. Madame Culthrie was her tutor every morning. I think Freya was expecting a gift. I scanned my dimensional closet and pulled out a book on the basics aether manipulation. She hadn’t awakened her core and most likely wouldn’t, but now that I knew I could purchase essence in the lowlands, I planned to get her a tier 1 essence to awaken her core if she didn’t get it forcibly.

Freya took the book and read the title. She was slightly confused and asked, “What if I do not awaken an aether core?”

I smiled, “I will figure something out.” Adrial and Kiara started mewing, already hungry again. Freya’s head spun to the bedroom. She was already rushing in before I could stop her.

“What are these? Did you get some cats?” she was already reaching through the bars to pet the white one, Kiara. Kiara looked at me, her red eyes glowing as Freya’s hand started rubbing. Kiara let Freya pet her but didn’t take her eyes off me.

Freya moved to the other cage, but I stepped forward, “Adrial is not as friendly as Kiara.” I didn’t think Freya could get her hand between the bars, but I wanted to warn her.

Freya looked back at me, “I like the names. What kind of cats are they?”

“Displacer beasts. They have six legs and two appendages. You cant see the appendages, but they have barbs at the end. They are apex predators,” I explained. Her eyes were wide.

“Wow! Are you going to sell them? They are so cute. Not sure if Monty will like them. He prefers chasing cats,” Freya said thoughtfully.

“Yeah, well, these two will grow to be the size of a horse. I don’t think Monty would match up well against them,” I advised.

“Can I help? Help train them,” Freya had her begging voice. I had planned to ask her anyway.

I started talking, “We can work something out. I need someone to feed them all day at the academy. Someone responsible and not let them out no matter what. I am going to build some bigger cages for them. When they are fully grown, they will probably stay in the hangar on the Maelstrom.”

“I will do it!” Freya said, moving back to pet Kiara. Now all I had to do was convince mother and father it was safe.

It had been a few days, and classes were starting tomorrow at the Dungeon Academy. I had been following Dar’s training prescription to the letter. Kiara was developing well, gaining about a pound every day. If I hadn’t had the cleanliness spell to clean up after the beasts, I probably would have never attempted to raise them and train them. The white cat could be left out of her cage, and I didn’t need to worry about her. She usually curled up on the bed and looked out the window at the plaza and skyships. Her glowing red eyes still were eery as I sensed intelligence behind them. I think she even helped to train her sister.

Adrial was still a bit of a troublemaker. She was always sprinting around the room and liked to whip me playfully with her barbed appendages to get my attention to feed her. She had learned to ball the barbs so they would not scratch me. The book mentioned it was hard to train this instinct out of the them. Both were learning, and I thought it was going to work.

Freya helped feed them at lunch but had to do it with other people present, usually our mother. Kiara was always well-behaved. Adrial was not. She hissed at other people unless she was eating. She had learned not to use her appendages against others.

The morning of the first day at the Dungeon Academy, I was in eating breakfast with Fera, Mera, and Gareth. Mia was bunking at the Guard Academy for the first term as it was required. Gareth was easily the most excited at the table. There were four different tracks in the Dungeon Academy. The fighter, the scout, the mage, and support. Each track had two focuses. The fighter had tanks and swordsmen. The scout focuses were ranged combat and finding and removing traps. Mages could choose damage or utility. Support focuses were porters and harvesters.

I was entering the mage focus for being a utility mage. I chose the utility class because the classes would focus on learning and using spells. Now I was considering switching to the damage focus. It would not be hard to do the first day of classes.

Fera and Mera were both going to be enrolled as mage support. So we would have been taking classes together. They both had learned just two tier 1 spells. They were just attending the dungeon to master a few spells. Gareth was focused on the fighter and planned to take classes as both a tank and swordsman. His goal was to dominate all the other fighters in the Dungeon Academy. I mentioned the academy focused on teamwork and fighting monsters, not others. He just brushed me off.

Mera and Fera were less excited about the Dungeon Academy. Mera just wanted to run the brewery, and Fera just wanted to tend her gardens on the roof of the Shiny Platinum. I could see why they felt that way since I was paying them so well. At breakfast, I compromised with them. They had to complete three years at the academy. After that, they could just work for me if that was their wish.

I knew Fera was hoping to tie Gareth down and marry him. I did not see that happening, and Gareth was going to be traveling a lot in the Sphere with me. Mera had given up on seducing me. She was always extremely friendly, but she was happy being employed by me. I think all of her time with the alchemist, Lachlan Cade, had actually started a relationship. At least, that is what I was guessing. Maybe I would regret not giving in to her advances one day.

The four of us walked together across town to the Dungeon Academy for the next chapter of our education.