Chapter 122 The Progenitor Dungeon

The Maelstrom circled the Spire once.  The cats were on the bridge and staring out the viewport with me.  The two nearby skyship cradles were now only half full.  The refurbished Harbinger I had finished had left.  Only a half dozen uniformed Navy men were on the deck of the other Harbinger.  We continued north to the dungeon.  When we landed near the dungeon team, it was late evening.  According to my absolute time spell, the fourth and final run should be finishing soon.

Lana approached me as I departed the Maelstrom.  She had a large, bright smile and said, “That was the most beautiful dungeon I have ever been in!”

“Did you finish all four loads of aetheric soil to the fields?”  I asked as the cats circled me and looked for a target.  They locked onto the sleeping Delphia again.  She appeared to be sleeping, but as soon as the cats started to crouch and move toward her, she turned her head and opened her eyes.  This caused the two brave cats to scatter into the brushes, seeking less alert prey.

Lana watched the comical cats before answering.  “Yes.  I spread the soil out, and it needs to be tilled into the earth.  I think the Wolfsguard will be working to turn the soil by hand the next two days before planting.  At least that is what I was told on my last trip a few hours ago.”

Sammie joined us, and she was coated in blood splatter, so I hit her with a cleanliness casting.  She looked down, “Thanks Storme!  Cutting the rabbits out of the air with my axe caused a huge mess.  At least the goats were not as bad.”

“Did you see the hippogriff?”  I questioned, as I was interested in the floor challenge monster.

“Just from a distance.  Ullmark and Talia had us keep our distance.  It is an easy first level.  Probably could run it with three or four experienced delvers,” Sammie remarked.

I just nodded, knowing she had only swung her axe at trees a few months ago.  She was now a confident warrior, bloodied a thousand times over on dungeon monsters.  I asked Sammie, “Are you willing to join the raid on the pirate ship?”

“Talia only mentioned it briefly before she entered the dungeon.  I think so.  I just had a few questions,” Sammie said contemplatively.  “Why isn’t Lana going, and what is the danger level like?”

“Good questions.  I did not see the need for her skill set, but she is welcome to come.  As for the danger, I hope to target a large, slow-moving skyship.  If we get into trouble, then we can flee on our faster ship.  I am guessing the pirates will have between thirty to forty men.”  I answered her.  I was actually planning to do a lot of research in Llorth when I returned to collect Bleiz.

Sammie nodded, “Ok, I am in, but Lana wants to come.”  I turned to the small young woman, who shrugged and nodded as well.

“Okay, Lana.  You are in at the same coin.”  Sammie hugged her small friend at my confirmation.  I moved away from them and asked everyone to load up on the Maelstrom.  It would bring them back to the Shiny Platinum so they could get a good meal before returning home.  I used my cleanliness spell on each of them as they climbed on board.  I had Leda come and take the cats on board as well.  They were flying to Aegis City and back while I was in the dungeon.

Twenty minutes later, Talia’s team emerged loaded with thirty rabbits, two goats and smiles.  I moved to talk with Talia, “How did it go?”

“Excellent!  We were tired, but it was fun.  Kindroth found an entire valley of the rare lilies Lochlan told us to be on the lookout for.  There were about a dozen blink rabbits, and Hadrian got bit in the ass, but we handled it.”  Talia said cheerfully, knowing her long day was over.

“The Triumvirate guards will be returning in a few hours, and I am going in by myself,” Talia frowned as I continued, “I want to lock out the dungeon, so I need five people to enter with me and leave.”  The dungeon could hold six delvers, and if five left I would be the only one inside.  I would have to either exit the dungeon or go to a lower floor to allow more people in.

“I am not letting you go in alone, Storme.  It only takes one mistake, and you could be killed.  I will go with you,” Talia said sternly like there was no point in objecting.

I gave it some thought, “Fine.  Ask if anyone else wants to join for an extra five gold.   I want someone to guard your back, so one scout or a fighter.”

Talia walked onto the Maelstrom while I geared up from my dimensional space with my light leather armor and weapons.  I planned to focus on spell development and not swing my falchion around.  My aether core was well over half full, and as long as I did not use lightning reflexes I would not run out of aether.  I was surprised when the female scout, Delphia, walked down the ramp with Talia.

Delphia was the woman who was sleeping every free moment she had.  She also seemed to attract the two displacer beast kittens.  I nodded to her and the three others who would enter with us and leave.  I entered the dungeon first and found myself in a meadow with gently rolling hills all around me.  It was mid-day, but the cool, dry breeze had no heat to it.  The air smelled fresh and clean. The grass was a rich green and knee-length and waved in the breeze.

Talia was behind me, “It is idealistic, but the rabbits hide in the grass and their burrows.  Also, be careful not to accidentally step in one of the burrows.  Someone in Ullmark’s group twisted an ankle.”

“Where did you harvest the soil from,” I asked as Delphia joined us.  The other three entered and left just as quickly, locking the dungeon from having others enter behind us.

Talia pointed, “We found that mound to the right was the quickest and easiest to load out Lana’s space.”

I walked in that direction and climbed the small incline to stand on top.  It gave me a view around me, and I found that everything looked the same in every direction...endless soft rolling meadows, grassy meadows with some bright flowers mottling the green.  Talia and Delphia joined me.  “Which direction is the hippogriff?”  Talia put her hands on my shoulders and turned me.  In the distance, I could see a larger hill.  It was not obvious unless you studied the horizon.  “Okay, we will head in that direction.”

 As we walked through the grass down the hill, Dephia announced, “Two rabbits to the right.”  I paused, and it took me a moment to spot them.  Their mottled brown coats blended well with the ground.

”How did you see them?”  I asked the scout.

“I heard their heartbeats,” she said. From my surprise, she added, “It is a tier three enhanced hearing ability.”

“Tier three.  Impressive.  Well, I am going to be working on my spell craft in this delve.  You two will be mostly observers and spotters.”  I turned to the rabbits and cast my lightning sphere.  I created a small ball of blue sparking energy and flung it between the two rabbits.  It struck the ground and spread out, stunning both rabbits.

I walked up to them and ended both of them.  I picked one up, it weighed about ten pounds and was large for a rabbit.  After confirming they had tiny aether crystals, I moved them to my dimensional space.  I would send them to a butcher when I got back to Aegis City.  Leveling my tissue extraction spell was not a priority this trip. I mostly wanted to focus on my offensive spells.

Delphia asked, “You have a dimensional space as well?”  The young woman sounded impressed.

I continued to walk, scanning the grass, and answered her, “Yes, same as Lana.”  It was not a secret, but the size of my space was unknown, so I decided to downplay it. As we walked, I used my lightning sphere repeatedly at around twenty feet. According to Talia, the rush attack for the rabbits happened at around fifteen feet. The rabbits would charge, leap, and then blink right in front of you, attacking exposed flesh with sharp teeth. With Delphia’s spotting, we never were attacked.  The stun lasted about seven seconds on the rabbit, and even then, they were slow to start moving for a few more seconds.  They were simple tier-one monsters with sharp teeth and a leaping blink attack.

After the twenty-eighth rabbit, Delphia announced,  “A goat is charging from over that hill.”

I immediately cast my arcane web on the ground in front of us.  The goat charged through the grass and was immediately snared in the web.  It bayed pitifully as it was thoroughly caught in the sticky matrix of webbing. I walked onto the web, unaffected by the surface, and ended the goat.   Studying the goat, the horn was about nine inches long and in the center of the forehead.  It was just dense bone, maybe good for carving, but that was about it.  I guessed the goat to be about a hundred pounds, and if it managed to charge and connect with the horn, it would be a painful experience.  I cut the goat’s throat and, moved it to my dimensional space and stood.  The goat also had a small aether crystal, but nothing special.  It was just another simple tier one creature.

Delphia muttered, “If it is going to be this easy, I might as well take a nap.”

I asked the woman, “Why do you sleep so much anyway?”

She blushed red, and stuttered, “I do not a-actually s-sleep.  I am meditating.”  She regained composure and started, “I can not turn off my enhanced hearing ability.  The meditation helps me reduce ambient noise and focus on specific sounds.  I am still trying to master it.  Before the mediation, the cacophony of sounds made it too hard to fight effectively.  That was why I chose the scout role.”

“Huh.  I think you are doing an excellent job,” I remarked.

“It is easier to filter out your two heartbeats than an entire group of delvers to identify the monsters.  Especially since you are doing all the fighting.  All I need to do is focus and listen,” Delphia smiled brightly.  I think she was impressed with my spellcraft.

As I continued my goat and rabbit slaughter, I asked Delphia between encunters, “Why did you volunteer?”

“Five gold is a nice incentive,” she admitted, “but mostly, I want to earn a permanent spot.  I want an apartment at the Shiny Platinum and constant employment at one of the best-delving operations in Skyholme.”

Talia smirked and coughed, “Best delving operations?  We would rank fifteenth or so in loot among all the delving guilds.  We do slightly better since most of our harvest is processed into high-end goods.”

Delphia laughed lightly at being revealed, “Fine, I was sucking up to the owner and High Mage.”

I paused my massacre.  I was likely to lose Ullmark, and we needed good scouts.  “Do you have any other abilities besides hearing, Delphia?  You did get a reading from Ennet and Wynna?”

Seeing an opportunity to impress me, she answered, “Tier one nimble.  It enhances my manual dexterity.  I have two tier-one skill affinities as well.  Stealth and awareness.”

I looked over at Talia, who looked impressed.  It was a good skill set for a scout.  She needed a bow, though, as she only had an array of throwing daggers.  I announced, “Good enough.  Consider yourself a full-fledged member of the Shiny Platinum Delvers.  You can see Remy for a room when you get back.  Do you know how to use a bow?”

Talia answered for her, “She has a short bow but did not bring it as she prefers close combat.”

“It is my vision,” she admitted.  “Objects far away are slightly blurry.  I am saving up for an ocular rejuvenation to correct my sight.”

“May I?”  I asked the scout.  She let me touch her, and I studied her body and her eyes in particular with my healing spells.

 It was easy to see the cause of her sight problems. My lesser restoration spell did quick work on optimizing her sight. I would not have noticed if I had not been specifically looking for it. This was how she was born, so the quick diagnostic would have shown her healthy with normal sight.

Delphia blinked rapidly and stumbled slightly. “What? Everything is so much clearer! I am fine. Just my brain is being overloaded with new details.” She studied her hands and then looked around, surprised. “Damn, you do not really see until you really see.” She looked at me with admiration and appreciation. “Master Mage Storme, how can I ever thank you! The healer in the capital wanted one hundred and fifty gold to alter my eyes!”

“Just keep my secrets, Delphia. Everything you see me do in here,” I indicated the dungeon, “Is not to be revealed to anyone.” She nodded and studied me again, looking me up and down.

Talia stepped between us and announced, “We should keep moving Storme.” She put her hand on my shoulder and gently pushed me toward the hippogriff.

I understood immediately that Talia was being protective and maybe a little jealous of Delphia. I considered Delphia for a moment, she was attractive with emerald eyes and an athletic feminine figure. She was a head shorter than me, about 5’9”. I continued my hunting and asked, “Did you attend the Dungeon Academy?”

Delphia responded quickly, “I did. I graduated last year near the bottom of my class, but that was due to my poor eyesight,” she explained. “I did a number of delves with other Guilds but never really fit in as I do with yours.”

The math told me she was about 22 years old. That would be about 25 in Earth years due to the longer years in the Sphere. I do not know why I was interested in the woman but I was. I asked, “Were your parents delvers too?”

Delphia answered as I stunned three rabbits grouped together, “My father is a mason in Aegis City, and my mother is a weaver. I did not want to apprentice in either profession, so I entered the Dungeon Academy under a sponsor. My sponsor was killed in the Sadian attack, and I was able to get my contract annulled.”

Talia seemed reconciled to my interest in the scout. We had reached the largest hill in the meadows, and I did not see the hippogriff. Talia stepped in, “I think we need to climb the hill. Ullmark said the hippogriff would appear, and then rabbits would rush up the hill to distract us.”

“It seems too simple. I will just cast some webbing on the ground around us to stop the rabbits and then ground the hippogriff with a web,” I stated my plan.

“So we are going to attempt the floor challenge then?” Talia asked excitedly.

“I do not see why not. This floor was fairly easy, and I want to practice my spells more,” I said while leading them up the hill and laying out arcane webs as I went. There were no rabbits in sight yet and we easily made it to the top of the hill. There was a large black circular stone here, maybe ten feet across. “I think we have to stand on the stone?” I guessed.

I took time adding arcane webs on the ground around the stone, and then we all stepped on the circular stone together. A piercing cry of an eagle reverberated in the skies. Talia pointed in the direction where the avian creature was coming. It was small but approaching fast. Rabbits started to appear around the base of the hill and raced up through the grass toward us, maybe twenty in total. “You two make sure the rabbits are handled. I will focus my efforts on the hippogriff.”

Talia muttered, “About time,” and began firing bolts of blue energy at the rabbits. That was her aether bolt spell. I focused on the winged creature approaching. I had not practiced casting the arcane web spell into the air and tested it once. The square arcane web did not have a lot of momentum and only made it twenty feet before descending. My attack was going to be about timing then. I warned my companions, “My range is limited to twenty feet, so be ready for the creature to crash near us.”

I started to fire my lightning spear, which had a range of one hundred feet before disappearing, but I only had good accuracy out to about forty feet. I fired a steady cadence of the blue-white shafts of lightning, and the hippogriff made aerial maneuvers to dodge, slowly its approach. It suddenly was less interested in attacking and more interested in not being hit.

I fired over forty lightning spears and only hit twice, but each strike was met with a shriek of pain from the beast. As the beast circled, Talia announced, “All the rabbits are finished, twenty-four in total.”

“I thought dungeon monsters just attacked mindlessly? Why is the hippogriff not swooping in on us?” I asked as I continued to fire lightning spears.

“The challenge monsters are smarter. It probably thinks it is exhausting you of aether by flying around out of range,” Delphia answered.

I stopped firing my lightning spear, and she was right. The flying beast swung toward us on a diving run. I readied my arcane web spell and caught it dead on at twenty feet. I had to activate lightning reflexes and pull Delphia out of the way of the crashing monster. We rolled on the ground together, and I was up quickly and firing lightning spears at the entangled hippogriff. Its tier two strength was breaking the webbing. Talia joined in with her arcane bolt, and soon the giant struggling half-horse, half-eagle, was silenced.

“That was not so bad,” I announced, looking for the reward chest. It was in the center of the circular stone. I opened the small chest and was confused. There were a dozen large silver coins with a hippogriff on one side and a cute bunny on the other. The only other object was a fan made from feathers.

Talia informed me, “Most of the items this dungeon gives are comfort items, according to Ullmark.” She picked up the fan and used it on herself. “Yes, this fan is enchanted to create a dry, cool breeze.

I took the fan from her and confirmed her assessment. I handed it back to her, “You can keep it, Talia.” I sent the silver coins to my dimensional space. The stone around us sank into the earth, forming stairs descending to the next level of the dungeon.

Delphia looked down at the steps and the runes around the entrance, indicating what we could expect on the next level. “Are we going to continue, High Mage Storme?”

I nodded, “I still need some practice, and we have two hours left before the dungeon is returned to the care of the Triumvirate. Let us go,” I said, leading the way.