Chapter 146

I returned to the Maelstrom to find an elated Lorae.  Her father had told her they were already going to Skyholme, and she had a thousand questions.  What was the food like?  How big were the islands?  What made them float?  Would she be allowed in the baby dungeon, as her father called it?

I immediately thought Freya would have someone to talk to.  Even though the young elf woman was 29 years old, she still reminded me of my young sister.  She rushed off to help pack but paused, “Kiara likes cow milk, and Adrial likes goat cheese.”  She was grinning, and I assumed her ability to communicate with beasts was improving.

Bleiz was grinning, too, “She was more concerned with talking to your two beasts than to me.”

“Feeling jealous?”  I told my friend with a smile.

“Not at all.  Just noting her focus is on trying to convince your two pets she is a better master,” Kiara’s tentacles whipped the back of Bleiz’s leg, surprising him and causing him to dance away.

I laughed, “It appears Kiara does not like being called a pet.”  I looked at the white displacer beast, “I consider you a companion, not a pet.” Kiara’s glowing red eyes stared at me, and then she moved to weave between my legs, purring. I gave her some scratches and pets, and the jealous Adrial joined in.  I paused in the attention, “Bleiz, get the cargo hold ready for twenty passengers.  I am headed to the Adventurer’s Hall.”

“I will have Leda prepare for your guests. You need me me to watch your back, High Mage,” he said, looking at the white Adrial, “at least until this one can do it herself.”

I waited twenty minutes for Bleiz, and then we were off to the Guild Hall.  I waited in line at the guild hall, and when I got to the desk, I asked, “I would like to post a job.”

The clerk pointed to a different line, so I waited in line again and repeated my question, “I would like to post a job.”

“Excellent!” the cheery woman said. “Please detail the job.”

I had never done this before, so I gave a description, “I am from Skyholme, and I wish to hire guards for my tower.”

“On Skyholme? Not Lloth?” I nodded. “I do not know where that is, but this is the wrong line. This is the line for posting local jobs.” she pointed at another counter and smiled weakly. At least there were only two people in this line.  Bleiz looked on, amused from his seat as I moved to another desk to wait in line again.

This time, I was in the correct line.  It took me a while to explain the unfamiliar islands to the clerk, but then I explained the job, “So, I have a tower in Skyholme.  A few members of a guild are staying with me.  If my tower came under attack, I wanted them to be able to defend it and collect a reward from a job posting.”

The clerk wrote some things and asked, “Ah, a residency defense pact, a termed defense agreement, or spontaneous assistance?  The first is someone staying with you, and you pay them a fee upfront.  The termed defense sets up a period of time they will aid you if you are attacked.  The spontaneous assistance is any incident arising they can help and be paid.”

“The last one,” I said.

“Great, group of individual contract...” The questions went on for thirty minutes as he filled out the form.  The contract was simple: if the tower was attacked, I would pay adventurers 100 gold per day per person to defend it.  This was quite high as a team of six to eight normally would be paid around 100 gold a day.  My generosity was to keep Relik and his team happy.

“Now we can file the paperwork, which is five gold.  You can also set up an escrow account for payments on the contract.  That will be two thousand gold,” the clerk said happily.

“What?  I put a large gold coin on the desk to cover the five gold posting fee,” but I was confused.  It seemed like every time I came to the Adventurer’s Hall, they wanted more and more coins.

“Ah, escrow is an account to pay adventurers completing the job posting.  It allows the guild to pay out immediately rather than find you for payment.  You had this contract capped at twenty completions, so you should put two thousand in the escrow.  When the contract is annulled in thirty days, any remaining coin can be collected by you.”  He explained patiently.

“What if I die or never come back?”  I asked suspiciously.

“After one year from the contract’s termination date, the funds revert to the Guild,” he said happily.  I guessed this happened a lot.  I produced the two thousand gold.  It was a small price to pay for Relik and his team’s services.

“What about postings for a skyship to defend the islands?”  I asked before leaving.

“That would be upstairs with the Guildmaster.  The postings are fairly standard based on the rank of captain.  I think they start at ten thousand gold for a bronze-ranked skyship captain.  But there is no guarantee anyone will select your posting,” he looked at the date on my first sheet. “It is an obscure location, too.  Maybe if you posted it a month ago.”  He handed me my five gold coins change.

I might have done a posting, but I didn’t know what ship captain would respond, if any.  I got copies of the contract for Relik and all my receipts.  The Adventurer’s Guild seemed like one major bureaucracy trying to squeeze out gold.

Bleiz was relieved that the five-hour task was done, “I do not see the point of standing in lines all afternoon.”

“I am sorry you were bored watching me work.  How about I buy you lunch?”  We stopped at a cart that sold steamed fish in rolled cabbage leaves.  We found a clinic after lunch, and I healed a dozen men and women, mostly dark elves.

When we returned to the Maelstrom, Relik and his team were at the bottom of the ramp.  They talked with the Princess, whose two guards were carrying large bags of recently purchased clothing.  “Storme!  You know Relik Fadrae!?  His name has even traveled as far as the Principality!”  Her praise sounded genuine.

I nodded to the Princess and asked Relik, “Are you ready to leave?”

“No, it will be a few hours yet.  The support team is still being put together, and the trainees are dueling for the right to join us.”  He said with a smile, “Lorae is already on board with her things.”  Relik’s group did not appear to have much, but dimensional spaces were the norm in the lowlands.

I handed him the job postings so he could register to take the protection work, “Let me know if these will work for you.”

He scanned the document and nodded, pocketing it.  I was hoping for a stronger reaction based on the high amounts, but his face was neutral. “We will claim the job posting when we reach your islands.” I headed up the ramp to the Maelstrom.

The cargo hold now had chairs and tables for our guests.  Bleiz left me to help Leda arrange the space.  The Princess had followed me up the ramp.  She was wearing a powerful new perfume, “Relik is quite a famous delver.  How did you manage to get him to come to your aid?”

“A father will do anything to keep his daughter happy,” I responded, planning to leave her on the cargo deck, but she followed me up.

Lorae was in my cabin with the cats, having a staring contest on the floor.  She was actually communicating with Kiara using her ability.  She looked up at me and then behind me at Amelia.  “While we are on your islands, I can help train them.  Kiara is getting very talkative.” She had puppy eyes that reminded me of Freya asking for a trip to Sweet and Treats.

I considered and looked at the cats.  They were dense and growing fast.  “You can teach them how to hunt squirrels on the grounds.  But for now, I need to work on my projects, and the cats need some rest. You wore them out.”

“No, I didn’t! We were only communicating!” Lorae scoffed, but Kiara jumped up on my small bed in my cabin, curled into a ball, and closed her eyes.  The black Adrial soon followed her sister’s lead.  Lorae looked bemused, “Traiters!” she scolded the cats mockingly before leaving.

Amelia was still in the doorway.  “Can I watch you while you work?”

“Maybe another time,” I said while slowly closing the door on her.

I sat down at my workbench.  I pulled out the contract with the Duskhunters.  The terms were all dependent on the quality of the Progenitor Dungeon.  If the dungeon was met with approval, I would receive tier four stones at half their cost, just 125 gold. I could also purchase eight tier five stones for 1,000 gold each.  In addition, I would be paid one tier-four stone for every eight-hour block they spent in the dungeon.  That was three tier-four stones a week for the one prescribed day.

For now, I pushed aside the work on the rings and rough-formed sixty short curved daggers from steel in my dimensional space.  Working on the weapons for the Wolfsguard was my second priority, but since the rings for my family were on hold, I started on the weapons.  I used my stone to call Bleiz and asked him to get me more steel ingots.

Each Wolfsguard would get their preferred curved dagger and medium-length blade.  The feather fall rings were also planned but not as important.  Bleiz knocked on my cabin door an hour later.  “Six hundred pounds of steel is being delivered.  The payment was one hundred seven gold.” I handed him a platinum and a large gold. He gave me three gold in return. If this had been Gareth, we would have kept the change.

Bleiz looked around the mess of rough-formed curved daggers.  “Been busy, I see.”  He picked up the rough-shaped dagger. “Are you enchanting them as well?”

“Just something quick.  I was thinking sharpness for the daggers and the long blades a hardness enchantment.  If the supply of mid-tier aether crystals works out with the Duskhunters, I may create more powerful weapons in the future for the Wolfsguard,” I told him. However, I was not going to be able to do that for a long time.

“I will keep an eye on your guests.  We are almost ready to depart.  Do you want me to get you when we leave?”  Bleiz asked.

“No, just have Cilia and Leda get us back as fast as possible,” I said, and I locked the door with an arcane lock after he left.  I picked up the first dagger...

Repeating the same enchantment over and over again was like muscle memory as it started to become faster.  Creating the final blade and runes took under an hour.  Every runic pattern I did was more practice for refining my artistry in this craft.  I had fourteen finished when Bleiz knocked again.

“We are approaching Skyholme. You missed an interesting voyage. Your Princess tried to recruit Relik to come try out some of the dungeons in the Principality.  He was gracious, asking her what each had to offer before refusing.  You would have enjoyed that exchange.”  Bleiz chuckled to himself.

“You are right. I would have enjoyed that exchange,” I smiled at the Wolfsguard.

I had my communication stone ready for when we were in range.  I could give Isla about a forty-minute warning about our impending arrival.  “Isla?”

Her voice came back, “Storme, you are back later than expected.  At least it is not two weeks late this time,” she said with mirth.  Then she regained her composure, “Did everything go as planned?”

“Mostly.  I have fifty thousand for the warehouses in Solaris City.  We also have twenty guests arriving at the Spire.  They are from an Adventurer’s Guild, the Duskhunters, in the lowlands and will be staying at the Spire.  Can we house them all?”  I asked Isla.

“I am in the Wolfsguard village.  I can get back to the Spire in twenty minutes!”  I could hear her running as she talked, her feet pounding the ground, and her breathing increasing.  “We have four free suites on the third four, and each has two bedrooms.  If they don’t mind smaller rooms, we have nine open on the second floor.  Though I need linens for two of them.”

“Great. We will be landing in about thirty minutes,” I ended the communication.

Isla had the tower staff outside and lined up.  Two Wolfsguard flanked the entrance of the tower.  The shiny uniforms looked good in the light of day.  We walked off the ship, and Lorae looked up at the Black Spire, “This is where you live?”

“Yeah, but the rent is a bitch,” I noted, trying to be funny.  “This is Isla.  She is one of my two assistants.  The other is Remy, but he handles most of the matters of coin.”

I was impressed with the grounds, and Relik and the Duskhunters’ members were also.  Remy came out of the tower running, not wearing a silvery uniform.  “The rooms will be ready in about forty minutes.  We doubled up some of the delvers, but we can hold everyone!”  He paused, seeing we were already here.

“Remy, when is our next access to the Progenitor Dungeon?”  I asked to break his embarrassment.

“Talia is rotating teams now at the dungeon now,” he answered promptly.

“Well, Relik and his team can be shown the dungeon location and then their rooms.” I addressed Relik, “It is just a short walk north. Remy, can you guide them?”  All twenty members, including Lorae, followed Remy, the Princess, and her two guards, mage, and attendant did as well. I went and collected my steel bars and took the cats to my room in the Spire.  I unloaded the bars and then went to find Isla rushing with the servants to get things ready.

“Relax, they are delvers and have low expectations.  I have five platinum bars for you to buy most of the warehouses in Solaris City.”  I put them on a table.  “Start renting the space out once we own them, and ask Mia to get guards for them as well.”

“How do you keep coming up with so much coin, Storme?  If I did not know better, I would say you are making it out of thin air,” she tested the weight of the bars in disbelief.

I grinned and said jokingly, “Practically, but my enchanting work sells well, and pirate hunting was profitable.  Don’t expect it all the time.  One day, maybe soon, there will not be any more coin.  I am still short twenty thousand gold for the warehouses.  Anything else I need to be aware of?”  I asked Isla.

“Otto, the alchemist, moved into the basement.  He has started brewing, and the delvers say his concoctions taste better than Lachlan’s. However, the efficacy is the same. The Wolfsguard village came under the scrutiny of the Triumvirate, but Loriel quashed it,” Isla reported.

I nodded but thought Loriel may have stirred the complaint herself in order to ‘quash’ it. “Very good, you can have Cilia bring you to Solaris City to handle the warehouses.”

I was feeling pretty good when I entered my suite. I had forgotten that Freya was staying in the bedroom in my suite. She was in the common room with an old friend, “Selin, it has been a while.”

She smiled and cocked an eyebrow, “The High Mage never found the time to visit an old woman at the Mage Academy. Too busy healing all of Skyholme?”

“Yes, I am trying to force a spell evolution. However, it may have been easier to learn a more powerful version of the spell. Are you here for Freya or me?” I asked, sitting on the sofa while the cats studied the new person cautiously from a distance.

“I am here for Freya but also will be leaving the islands soon. An old friend of mine in the lowlands needs my help, maybe in a month or so. Long enough to help this one with her first spell,” Sana Velin said.

Freya was surprisingly quiet and obedient. Seeing my surprise, Selin laughed, “I told her if she was not disciplined, then I would not teach her. Interesting displacer beasts you have there. I would have assumed the white one was a cold weather variant, but the fur and bone structure do not match. I once met a mage who created his own variant. A miniature version, just one hundred pounds, and lightning quick. But I digress.”

There was another reason that I had wanted to see the old mage, “Selin, do you know about the upper floors of the Black Spire. They have been sealed for two thousand years, to my knowledge.”

“I know the history of the Black Spire. The Haikuram high wizard Kurota resided here.” She faced Freya, “Kurota is the avian who shattered Skyholme into separate islands.” She turned back to me, “A few people have been killed trying to break in over the centuries. The protections are rumored to be powered by the power that keeps the islands afloat. I would love to see the access door.”

“Follow me!” I said, a little excited about possibly gaining access. We went to the fourth floor with all the glass windows. The stairs growing up were on the far side. We climbed the stairs and got to the door with all the runic markings. Sana Velin studied them, Freya and myself at her back.

She finally spoke, “Yes, I can see why no one has gotten past the protections. It is a brilliant use of an advanced version of the arcane lock spell, probably tier five.”

“So there is no way inside? No way to gain access?” I asked, extremely disappointed. My dreams of a powerful mage’s library were dashed.

“Unlikely. It is set up to require a magical key to enter. Well, not a key, but an attunement to the caster’s aether core. He is long dead. Forcing it open…” She thought for a long moment. “I might know someone who is foolish enough to risk the backlash. It just so happens it is the person I am going to the lowlands to help. I will see if they will come and examine the runes. With your permission, High Mage.”

“It would be a long time before I could even try to break a tier five arcane lock. I agree. If your friend will come, he can try,” I replied. My thoughts were what the payment would be.

“Come, Freya,” Selin said, descending the steps. “We can practice for another hour before I have to return to the Academy for class.”

I looked at the door for a few moments, and I could feel it mocking me. One day, I would gain access. I had other problems to worry about now. I returned to my artificing.

A few hours later, I learned that Relik and his team had entered the dungeon and completed all five layers in just six hours. Relik was looking for me and wanted to meet.

Remy directed me to the fourth floor, and I found Relik on the balcony with his team of seven talking, staring off at the city. I approached, “Relik, I guess the dungeon was a bit of a disappointment?”

“No, the opposite. It is a great training dungeon and has ample resources. After I talk with leadership, I think we may be interested in setting up a permanent training cadre here.” Relik said seriously.

I hesitated before saying, “The Black Spire is just a temporary benefit, Relik.” Relik gave me a hard stare, but he grinned when I did not back down.

“I know. You do quite well for yourself, Storme. I think we can discuss maybe leasing an acre of your estate near the dungeon? Maybe bundle it with a day’s access? Does an annual lease of one hundred thousand sound fair?”

Relik was smiling, but I was doing the math in my head. I wasn’t even sure what the Triumvirate policy was for adventurer guilds. I know they wanted more adventurers with the open trade starting soon. I thought I needed to divide the land lease and dungeon access apart. I was sure I was breaking all kinds of Skyholme tax laws, but my access to the Progenitor Dungeon was unfettered and free of Triumverite tracking. I did not know how much the Duskhunters could harvest either.

“The land lease will be twenty-five thousand a year, renewable if in good standing. For the dungeon access, valued at twenty percent of the harvest and the aether stone discount and payment still stand,” I countered.

Relik seemed to consider. “What is the tax rate for dungeons in Skyholme?”

“As part of my deal with the Triumvirate, I do not pay taxes on my harvests from this particular dungeon. The others in Skyholme, we just pay an access fee and have to sell any dungeon elixirs to the Triumvirate—although that may have changed.” I replied not aware if the law had changed. We never delved deep enough for elixirs anyway.

Relik pulled out two dungeon elixirs from his pocket. “So these have to be sold to your government?” His impassive stare bore into me.

I was speechless. I couldn’t see what the essences were, but one was tier 1, and the other looked like a tier 2. “Uh, no. You can keep them.”

He nodded and put them away, “Your agreement sounds reasonable. I will contact my guild leaders to confirm. We will probably hire a local build team for the small Guild Hall.”

This all happened so fast and informally that I was still in shock. “Can you create a delvers guide for the Progentor Dungeon?” It was too early to ask him to help train my teams, but it might be beneficial.

A woman who I recognized as Marigold, the illusionist, held up a notebook. “Already started. Should have it complete after two more clears. And I will make you a copy when it is done.”

“So, how much is 20% of your harvest from this dungeon?” I asked.

“Depends on who is delving, but I can guess we can harvest between a million to a million and a half annually. So two to three hundred thousand,” he smiled at my disbelief. He explained, “This dungeon has not been squeezed in a while. It is flush with creation aether. If a dungeon is harvested heavily, it reduces resources over time. This venture could become profitable if all your island dungeons are the same.”

“Profitable? Where does all the gold go that you make?” I asked. I could see if they needed to support a skyship or something.

“The Duskhunters have about a thousand members in five cities. Only about one hundred are delvers. The delvers support everyone else. Equipment upgrades and replacements are probably our biggest costs. But we are one of the top guilds in the region. If one of our delve teams doesn’t return from a delve…that could be almost ten million in gear lost,” Relik said.

“Does that happen often?” I asked in disbelief at the sum. My ability to create precious metal suddenly seemed—trivial.

Relik nodded gravely, “We lose a team every few years. Usually, it is exploring a new dungeon. We are going to rest now. I will confirm details once I talk with our leaders in a few minutes.”

“You have a tier-five communication device?” I asked as they left.

“Doesn’t everybody?” Relik said, smirking as he headed down the stairs with his team. A tier-five communication stone was hundreds of thousands of gold!