Note from the author: All references to ‘**displacer beast’** will be replaced with ‘**phantom cat’** as displacer beast is copyrighted by WoC. Edits in earlier chapters will be done as posted to RR and scribblehub. The next description of the beast will be black panters with the ability to manifest phantom limbs to restrain prey. They can also camouflage their bodies. So, there will be a bit of a rewrite in capture, killing, and training. I am doing this now, so that if I publish this book in the future, I will not run into problems.

Chapter 148

The runic identity I had was probably not unique, but it was something that I could do effortlessly with my exacting metal shaping ability.  I had curved all the right angles so my runes had no corners.  Next, I added false runes in the formula.  I added the dungeon runic symbols for platinum, hydra, and phantom cat.  Finally, I thickened the central cornerstone runic line, making it wider, and inscribed the dungeon word for ‘storm’ in relief.  It was so faint that you would need magic to see it.

I looked at the parchment with the redesign for the feather fall ring.  The entire pattern flowed and looked almost dizzying, like a swirling whirlpool ready to suck you in.  Was the complexity needed?  Probably not.  But it made sense to me.

Bleiz was standing behind me, “Storme, the guests are arriving, and you have not even started dressing.”

Bleiz was in the same shiny, silvery uniform of my house servants and guards.  He had on the updated combat version that Pakkam had helped design.  The original uniform had some mobility limitations, especially for the more limber Wolfsguard.  “You look marvelous,” I told my guard captain.  “What was the final count on guests?”

“Four hundred and seventy-two.  It will be crowded.  And as you requested, there will be no announcements introducing important persons.  Loriel was not happy about it,” Bleiz said. I waved off Loriel’s disappointment.

“How is Isla doing?” I inquired.  Isla had been under much more stress than I had realized.  This event was for three powerful nations and twenty-six trading companies in the Sadian Empire.  I had given her an additional six thousand gold to prepare for the party.

Pakkam entered my room without knocking, “High Mage, your presence is requested on the fourth floor.  The first guest’s skyship will be docking soon.”  He looked me over, “You have not even dressed yet, High Mage?”

I ignored his question, “How is security?”

“We have fifty-two Wolfsguard, your fifteen delvers, Relik’s eight-person team, and ten guards on loan from the Shiny Platinum,” he said confidently.  “Four Harbingers and six Wasps patrol the skies with the two warships from Marstom and two warships from the Sadians.  I think we will be ready to respond if something arises,” he smirked.

“What about the search for the Black Mauraders?”  I undressed and started putting on my official High Mage robes.

Pakkam told me, “I was just in a meeting with Callem and Sebastian.  Every ship’s identity is confirmed and scanned with magic.  The one hundred and seven ships that have arrived in the last two days had no signs of the Black Mauraders. But their leader in this region of the Sphere, the Sky King, is said to be on the move.  Also, there have been no Black Maurader attacks in the lowlands for two weeks, according to the Adventurer’s Guild.  That is improbable, as there used to be one or two every day.”

I had been in one of the meetings as well.  It was held two days ago at the Black Spire to discuss security for this event.  The Adventurer’s Guild representative was present, and they believed the Black Mauraders could field a fleet of a hundred ships.  I joked that it should be ninety-eight since I had captured two of them, but my humor was lost on those present.  Still, no one knew where the Mauraders were staging, which put extremely high tension in the room.

I was now fully dressed and hit myself with a cleanliness spell.  “Let’s go,” I let Pakkam and Bleiz escort me, both behind me, side by side.  Before the Duskhunters arrived, I had been looking forward to this event.  There were a large number of merchant traders who would be setting up contracts tonight.  The Duskhunters had already leased all my warehouses in Solaris City.  The contract should be formalized soon, and I would also have the twenty thousand gold to purchase the remaining warehouses.

I climbed the stairs of the Spire from the third-floor suites to the fourth floor. I guess it was a ballroom now.  A stage was set up on the far side with a dozen musicians and one singer.  My staff, which had multiplied to twenty-six, were setting up buffet tables, operating the bar, and preparing to be stationed around the room to assist guests.  Relik spotted me and was wearing a pristine white suit.  He approached with a smile, “You throw quite the party, High Mage.”

“Not me, Isla.  I just paid for this with an abyss of coin,” I said, shaking wrists with the delver.

“Two of our guild leaders are arriving up from Goldreach with a delegation from the Emperor.  They have your coin and will finalize the contract.  Three construction mages are with them.  They should be able to build our residence in two or three days,” Relik said happily.

“Fantastic.  How many members are staying in your residence?”  I inquired.

“Probably forty or so.  Thirty being trainees for the Progenitor Dungeon, five trainers, and five administration,” he said, taking a glass of wine from a servant.

“How big is the residence they are building?” I asked, thinking that was twice as many people as I had assumed would be coming.

“We will use the entire acre in the contract, four towers at the corners, each sixty-foot round and three stories tall.  The towers will be the housing.  One large central building for training and feeding the members,” he explained.

I laughed, “If there was a wall between the towers, then you would be building a castle!”

Relik didn’t laugh.  “Well, actually, there will be.  Nothing serious, just ten feet wide and twenty feet tall with a ten-foot footing.  It will have a large number of runic defense enchantments on it.”

The contract had noted they would be given one acre to lease annually for twenty-five thousand gold.  The only stipulation the Triumverite put on it was no buildings taller than forty feet and no basements deeper than twenty.  Other than that, they were free to construct whatever they wanted.  They were building a mini fort.

Seeing my distress, Relik put his hand on my shoulder, “Don’t worry.  Our guild construction mages are excellent.  The structure will be majestic and aesthetically pleasing.  It will blend in with your estate and look like it had stood a thousand years like the Spire.  If attacked, we will also come to your aid in the Black Spire as promised.  I accepted the contract at your Adventurer’s Guild in the city.”

I decided not to dwell on it.  “How did that go?  I have never been to the Adventurer’s Guild in Skyhold, just the one in Aegis City.”

Relik shrugged, “A lot of stares from the citizens.  I don’t think many have even seen a dark elf before.  As for the Guildmaster.  Not the usual level of competency I am accustomed to.  There are some strange rules on your islands as well.  But we got things done.  I got tokens to try two other dungeons in your islands as well.  Marigold is excited about the variety.  The Ogre’s Castle and the Frost Vault. We picked up your local guidebooks as well.”

The first skyship was pulling along the platform outside—one of our Navy Harbingers.  Callem, Sebastian, and Loriel exited the craft first, and then twenty others in Miaden and Torrent colors.  In a sleek, light green dress, Isla went to greet the arrivals.  With no formal introductions, you either had to know who someone was or have someone tell you.

Relik pointed to an older man with a beer gut getting off the Harbinger, “That is the guild master for your Adventurer’s Hall in the city.”

Lorae came over with Freya.  Both were wearing identical dresses, except Freya’s was blue, and Lorae’s was green.  Freya had a chocolate stain on her dress from something she ate at the dessert table.  I used my cleanliness spell to remove the stain she had not even noticed. It looked like she had two eclairs in her hand, ready to eat next.  Lorae asked, “Are Kiara and Adrial coming to the party?”

“I don’t think I have time to watch them…” I started.

Freya jumped in, “We will do it!  They listen to Lorae really well, and she has been working on having them follow on her heels.”

“Don’t you think Monty would get jealous?” I countered.

“Monty could come too!  He would just sit by the food table waiting for people to feed him scraps,” Freya said confidently.

I wavered, but in the end, I consented. “You two can get all three.  If they cause problems, then you will be held responsible.”  The pair rushed off.

Relik smiled, “I have not seen Lorae this happy in a decade.   Your sister may be a third of her age, but they get along like twins.”

“I am glad that is the case.  Freya has been a bit isolated since moving to Aegis City,” I noted as the next two skyships began disembarking passengers.  Loriel and her group remained near the dock to greet them.  If I stayed here, maybe I would only have to talk with a handful of people.

Lorae came up the stairs with Adrial and Kiara on either side of her.  They were half a step behind her, and I would say they looked pretty awesome.  A large group of eyes focused on the.  Monty came up the stairs at Freya’s side and wildly sniffed the air at the smell of food.  The white cat, Kiara, was taking in the room with her red glowing eyes.  When she spotted me, she trotted over and sat on my left side.  Adrial followed her sister and sat on the other side.  Lorae’s mouth hung open in disbelief and upsetness.  Relik patted my bicep, “I better go talk with her, or she will be moody all night at your cat’s betrayal.  I think she wanted to be the center of attention tonight.”

I crouched and gave the cats some scratches.  Another series of skyships came, and more people departed.  I assumed the order of arrival was predetermined.  The music started playing, and some of my delvers started dancing.  The brothers, Hadrian and Cesar, were dancing with Mera and Fera and Lachlan was dancing with Zinnia, a healer from the delve team.  I was surprised Lachlan was here. He was tolerated but not really liked by everyone. That was one of the reasons I left him at the Shiny Platinum.

My focus was soon divided as I was having person after person come and introduce themselves to me.  Heads of Sadian Merchant Houses, city Governors, relations to the Emperor, and two ship captains from the Skyholme Navy.  The ballroom was filling up quickly, with over three hundred people already present. The only issue was that a steady stream of guests had to be brought down one floor to use the toilets.  Isla had done a remarkable job.  Illusionists had started animations on the glass as the sky turned to twilight.  The ceiling of the ballroom had a deep darkness spell cast on it, with only twenty light globes sticking out of the blackness.  They were the light globes I had designed, but I had not made these particular ones.

Galaeron approached me, “High Mage is it?” One of the leaders of the Duskhunters shook wrists with me. We had met in Lloth at his guild hall when he was playing poker.  “Had to come and see the floating islands for myself.  I am actually impressed.  I believe this is for you,” he passed me a black velvet pouch.  I took it, “Two hundred large platinum.  Relik said you probably would have taken payment in aether crystals, but with Relik’s team up here, the guild quota is tight for Lloth.”

He knelt to inspect the phantom cats.  “The white one is Kiara, and the black one is Adrial,” I informed the guild leader.

“Remarkable.  I have only fought their like before.  I can see Lorae’s fascination with them.  The glowing eyes have such depth to them.”  He reached out to pet Kiara, and she manifested her phantom limb in a warning.  “Guess not.  I have a small amount of foresight, and if I had petted her, she would have lashed out at me.”  He sighed and stood.  “Relik has the signed contract, and I will be going on the next run of your Progenitor Dungeon, but other than that, have a great evening, High Mage.”  He bowed in respect and was swallowed by the crowd.

The evening wore on, and the cats stayed obediently on my heels, waking with me and sitting when I stopped to talk with someone.  Some people were trying to make friends with me, and others were trying to work deals with me.  With my twenty percent from the Duskhunters, I had no motivation to seek small gains from complex trades.  The Duskhunters were even going to lease all my six warehouses in Solaris City and supply their own guards in four months.

All foreigners were restricted to Aegis City for the first four months of open trade.  Then it was four more months, just on Titan’s Shield Island.  After that initial eight months, trade would be all across all the islands. Loriel hoped the gradual opening would give the people and Navy time to acclimate.

The lease was a thousand gold monthly for all six warehouses, not a huge sum after taxes, but it was still generating income.  I probably could have gotten more as each warehouse had a few sections, but this way, my investment wouldn’t create more work for Remy and Isla.  Isla looked like she had finally relaxed and was dancing with Remy on the far side of the ballroom.  Things had gone well; after four hours, it was about time for me to exit.

I took one step toward the stairs and was stopped, “Storme, you wouldn’t be leaving without dancing with me?”  The Princess blocked my escape route.

“The cats are tired, as am I,” I made an excuse.

“One five-minute dance will not cause you duress, High Mage.  Please?”  She sounded sincere, and I agreed five minutes was not a huge investment of time.

I nodded and complimented her, “You look beautiful tonight, Princess.”  Her dark blue silk gown flowed like water from some enchantment, and her face had glitter and a glow to it, highlighting her lips.

We moved to the dance area in front of the band, and I noticed Monty chewing on a large bone under the buffet table.  The cats saw him, too, and I think they held up their noses at the lack of decorum shown by the massive shepherd.  But I was probably imagining it.  Adrial hopped up on the band stage and sat to watch.  Adrial followed her after a moment.

The dance styles were slightly different as the Princess taught me the four steps in her native dance.  We were soon moving across the dance floor with her smiling and giggling in happiness.  I couldn’t help but release a small smile as well at her joy.  Dancing had its own energy to it, and it was kinda fun.  “And the stoic High Mage cracks, and all can see he does know how to have fun,” the Princess verbally jabbed at me while smiling.

I remained and danced a second song with her, and then Talia boldly cut in for the third song.  Namira took my fourth song, and Freya my fifth and last.  I took the time to clean a second stain on her dress. I excused myself and was surprised I had avoided Loriel the entire night.  I had watched her as she had worked the crowd and was probably working out a dozen trade deals for Skyholme and another dozen for herself on the side. One thing I was certain of was that she had a profitable night.

The cats followed me to my suite and curled up on the couch.  I think they were tired from being on alert all evening.  Bleiz appeared inside the room, “Storme, you are not a bad dancer.  I am better, of course, well, I would be better if I ever learned how.”

“You can return to the party Bleiz, and learn how to dance.  I am fine and will be setting alarms,” I smiled, and I dismissed my friend and bodyguard.

“No, I am worn out for the evening.  A few guests were casting some magic, but it all seemed mundane,” Bleiz seated himself on the sofa between the cats and scratched their ears. They erupted into purrs with their eyes closed.

Pakkam knocked and entered, “Guests have started to leave.  No fights broke out, and only a few harsh exchanges of words.  To be expected after centuries of war.”

“I am going to work on the feather fall rings for your crew, Pakkam.  Should have some ready tomorrow,” I said, unrolling the sketch of my work on the tea table in front of the sofa.

“High Mage, it is not for me to question your generosity, but I think it would be wiser to artifice the aether shield ring you gave me.  The feather fall rings will save someone if they go over the side.  But this,” he held up the hand that wore the shield ring I gave him, “this will save their life in a fight.  Maybe more than once.  Unless the cost is too great?”

I looked at the runic drawing for the feather fall ring that took me a long time to complete.  Eventually, I would have to do other runic patterns in my signature design.  “I agree.  I was thinking of doing it after the feather fall ring.  I guess I was more worried about the skyship crashing into the lowlands.  I will do as you ask.  I have the aether crystals from the Duskhunters, and each ring only takes more time.”

I rolled up the scroll and sent it to my dimensional closet.  I took the cats to my room and spent the entire night writing out the runes for the shielding ring, adding in my signature patterns.  I even artificed two of the rings before realizing it was morning. Adrial was reminding me it was past breakfast.  I had not slept a wink and checked on Freya, who was passed out in her room still in her dress.

The fourth floor was a mess, and no one had finished cleaning yet or set out breakfast.  I took some non-perishable food from the tables and then started to use my cleanliness spell to clean the space.  I only spent a few minutes walking the room and cleaning. It was only for the opportunity to level the cleanliness spell.  At the window, I noticed Calaeron and Relik sparing.  My jaw hung a little bit as the ground erupted behind Relik as he dashed forward.

A flash of sparks and he was passed Calaeron.  Relik was fast, and that was not from a spell.  That had to be an ability.  Calaeron was on his back foot with every clash, and then during the sixth one, I observed Relik’s blade snap and went flying.  He looked down in disgust and tossed the useless weapon aside, and conceded the match to Calaeron.  I descended the Spire to meet them in the yard.

They had torn up a good portion of the grass in the area.  I picked up the broken blade first to inspect as I walked toward the pair.  The sword had been well made and had a hardness rune and stamina rune.  The stamina rune was complex, keeping the wielder’s energy up by draining their fat stores.  Relik spoke as I approached, “That blade cost five thousand gold Cal, you going to replace it?”

The guild leader laughed at Relik, “You have others, and you wanted to practice.  Maybe our High Mage friend here can practice with you?”

I located how the blade broke.  The tier five aether crystal had shattered in the hilt.  Seeing my inspection, Calaeron confirmed, “A little trick I picked up from a dungeon essence.  I can shatter aether crystals with enough time.”

“Tier four ability,” Relik noted.  “Takes him a while to break down tier five crystals, but tier four and lower he can do on a single pass.”  Calaeron bowed, accepting the praise.  I was surprised they were revealing their secrets so openly, but then again, they were famous, and maybe it was common knowledge.

Calaeron hit himself with a cleanliness spell, and Relik grunted. Relik used a bracer to do the same effect.  Calaeron spoke, “Our construction mages are starting this morning.  Do you want to watch them work?  I, myself, never get sick of seeing them work.”

“I would if I had the time.”  I hesitated and then asked, “Would your guild mages be available to hire?  Isla has a village, a barracks, and dozens of other projects she is behind upon.”

Calaeron rubbed his chin, thinking, “The mages are due in Llorth in six days.  I am sure they can get whatever you need done in that time.  Each mage is one thousand gold a day, which is a discount because I like you!”  He said with a smile.

“Free year lease on the six warehouses in Solaris City?”  I counter-offered.

He swayed a bit, thinking, “Agreed, but again, only because I like you.”  We shook on it.

The Duskhunter mages raised their small stone fort with magic for the next two days.  They then proceeded to finish the Wolfsguard town and barracks in three more days.  Talking to the construction mages, I learned all three dark elf mages had evolved a few spells past level twenty-three, making their building progress so rapid.  The work was also exceptional.  Smooth, seamless stone and on the buildings.  The stone was a uniform light gray in color, and Calaeron had been correct in they had a good aesthetic taste.

For my part, I finished the shield rings for the Wolfsguard and completed the artificing work for the kitchen in the tavern.  The Shiny Platinum II was now open.  The Duskhunters were using it, and it appeared the dark elves had a sweet tooth for Mera’s Frost Mead.

A Harbinger came and landed in the new pond.  I thought perhaps Sebastian had sent me another runic replenishment job.  The captain walked with purpose toward me.  He had ominous news instead, “High Mage, an Adventurer’s Guild in the lowlands, has located the Black Maurader fleet.”