Chapter 145

In the middle of the flight to Llorth, the cats woke because they decided it was past time to eat.  I fed them and did their reward training.  Kiara, the white displacer beast, showed her ability for the first time.  Her body blurred, and she projected a false image of herself a few inches away.  It was quite impressive, especially since they usually did not display the ability until they were six months old.  She was a real prodigy.  Adrial, seeing the praise I lavished on her sister, tried to do the same but lacked the capacity.  I still praised her for trying.

With the attack coming, I needed to give my family everything they needed to protect themselves.  I had a few ideas on what devices I wanted to create.  Bracelets or bracers were the most common.  Large enough to easily inscribe the runes and aether gems but also easily recognizable for what they were.  Rings were difficult to manufacture due to the small size of the runes but were also the most efficient in terms of ease of wearing and hiding their true nature.  Dungeon rings were rare but were valued highly. Wearing rings on toes was not unheard of, but most people would opt for an ankle bracelet instead.

You could only wear one ring on each hand, as two rings on one hand would interfere with the other’s operation.  Generally, it was also difficult to have multiple defensive artifacts active at once as well. It was the same as on a skyship where the effects started to overlap and interfere with the function.

I decided to create two rings for each of my family members that were known to be complimentary and would function normally.  To the cat’s dismay, I had four of my artificing books spread out as they realized we would not be playing anytime soon.  I had two common simple runic patterns I had chosen.

The first was a basic combat shield.  The simple aether shield could block a single attack, expending aether.  Then, it would take time to recharge, usually a few seconds on the reset.  The strength of the shield, recharge time, and number of shields depended on the aether crystal used to power it.  The suggestion in the text was a tier-four green crystal.

The second common defense ring hardened the skin.  It was extremely useful again against piercing and slashing damage and not as effective against blunt damage.  If the aether shield was expended or recharging, then these runes would function. More complicated rings involving multiple enhancements and complex runes were available, but I figured I could do one of each of these for my family.  Most of the cost was in the aether gem, about the size of a pea, to power them.  A green crystal was about 250 gold, while a tier five blue aether crystal would cost about 1250 gold for each ring. Making the rings out of gold and mithril would cost about thirty gold in additional materials.

The runes were more complicated than the earrings I gave the twins for their fourteenth or the simple feather fall rings. I took out the dungeon runic book next and began sketching the runes and adding my artistic personality to the runes.  I started over three times trying to find a style that fit me. I was getting frustrated and happy to stop as Bleiz told me we were landing in Llorth.

I went to the bridge to find the Princess talking with Leda and Cilia, all of them sipping wine.  I could see Lloth approaching in the distance and took the pilot’s seat from Cilia.  I doubt she was drinking heavily.

Princess Amelia asked, “Leda said you are familiar with the city.  I would appreciate a tour, High Mage.”

“I do not have time for you, Princess.  I plan to be on the ground less than four hours.  So be it if you are not on board when I lift off.”  I said, trying to instill some humor into my tone but think I came off more rude.

Amelia’s eyes went up in hurt surprise, “Then Leda, I will take you up on your offer to be my guide,” the Princess said, smiling toward Leda.

I took the Maelstrom on the correct approach and was directed to an open pad by a flagger in a tower.  As soon we landed, I was moving off the bridge, “Cilia, stay on board with the cats, please.  I am headed to the encounter and then to the Adventurer’s Hall.  I plan to be back in less than four hours.”

I was off the ship with Bleiz by my side.  “Do you want to know what they were talking about on the bridge?”  Bleiz asked as we walked through the gates.

“No,” I said, not concerned.  Bleiz grunted, and I could tell he wanted to let me know.  The Princess was playing games, and I was not interested in humoring her. We made our way to see Tallot.

Talbot was in a fine mood as we arrived. “I have sold nearly half your stock skyship merchant, Storme!”  He shuffled two customers off to his assistant and waived me to the back room.

The place seemed a little neater, “Have you been cleaning up?”

“Some.  Had to hire a few extra hands.  After Lorae’s share, taxes, and my commission,” he opened a ledger, “fifty-two blades from your artificer earned him fifty-two thousand, three hundred and eighteen gold.”  He looked up smiling, but I had been hoping to get all seventy thousand gold for the warehouses this trip.

“Very good, Tallot.  Thank you for selling the blades for my employer.  How long to sell the remainder, do you think?” I asked as he went to a safe to get my coin.

“Hmm, maybe a month.  They have become popular in the last two weeks.  One customer bought three!  I was creeping up the price, but if your enchanter is need of coin, I can dip the price some, but I will not alter my commission,” he grinned as the door swung open.  Tablet pulled out five bars of platinum; each marked the weight of one hundred coins.  Each bar was valued at ten thousand gold. I checked one with my metal sense, and it was 97% pure. I nodded.  After the bars, the remaining were twenty platinum coins and gold coins counted from trays.

I came to a decision, “No, sell them at a fair price.” I moved the precious metals into my dimensional storage.

“I have a job for your artificing friend if you are interested.”  While pulling two blades out to go on display, Tallot said, “It is an adamantine blade with a pair of enchantments.”

I paused and nodded at him to continue.  He pulled out a scroll with sketches of the blade.  “With adamantine being an insulator, it takes a special artificer to work the metal.  This blade is a gift for an Emperor’s first son at his coronation in a nearby elven kingdom.”

I studied the drawings.  It was between a short sword and a long sword in length.  The blade was to be entirely adamantine with mithril runic work for the two enchantments.  One enchantment was for sharpness, and the other for…charisma?  No, that was not right.  I studied them again, not quite piecing it together.  “It is called inspiration,” Tallot solved my confusion.  “People you are leading fight harder and fatigue more slowly.” The runes were very complex for the inspiration effect—more complex than anything I had done so far.

“This is a lot of adamantine,” I noted the total weight required for the blade.

“Yes, they have a dungeon that produces a coin or two when the fifteenth-layer floor boss is beaten.  The Emperor has been saving a long time for this,” Tallot took the parchment and rolled it up.  “Payment is three adamantine coins if your enchanter is interested.  For obvious reasons, the work needs to be done in the kingdom.”

Three adamantine coins were three hundred thousand gold!  More importantly, the adamantine could be used to do the runes on one of my cannons.  “Can I keep this and show it to him?” I indicated the scroll with the details of the job.

“As long as you give me credit for bringing it to his attention.  The job is a month old, and no one has taken it so far.  It is just too difficult working with adamantine and still making the runes fictional.”  Talbot handed me the scroll with a knowing smile.

I thanked him and left.  Instead of heading to the Adventurer’s Hall, I went to visit the gnome exchanger, Gorsch.  I wanted to question him on the best place to purchase aether stones for enchanting.  Skyholme was fairly cheap up to tier three, and prices went up quickly due to scarcity after that. Maybe once free trade opened, they would stabilize to a lower level.  Only two dungeons in all of Skyholme produced tier four aether stones, and one of those produced tier five.  No dungeons in the islands had tier six or seven stones.

“Storme, good to see you!  Is Lorae with you?”  the short gnome greeted me with a firm handshake.

“No.  Master Enchanter Gorsch, I want to see where you sourced your aether stones from.  Cost is quite high where I am from, and I have a list to pick up,”  I handed him a list of aether stones, their tier, and size.  He studied the list for a few moments before handing it back.

“I contract directly to Guilds. I use the Duskhunters mostly. That is Lorae’s father’s Guild. They make the most deep dives to the city’s dungeon. Relik usually gives me ten percent off the market price, but I still pay the taxes on it.” He was watching me to see my reaction.

“I will ask him,” I said, and he smiled.

“You know Lorae can not stop talking about your two displacer beasts. She has been bothering her father non-stop. She has been saving every commission I give her on your blades to get her own,” Gorsch said evenly. I spent some time talking with Gorsch about dungeon runes and making my own work more distinctive. His work was more basic, but he curled one terminal end of one particular rune every time. His signature, so to speak.

He sold me books with copies of various dungeon runes for five hundred gold to add to my collection and help me find my niche. Bleiz, during this time, just wandered the shop, looking at items on the shelves.

Leda used the comm stone to contact me. Four hours had already passed, and she was wondering when we were leaving. I told her one more stop.

The Guild Hall for the Duskhunters was a massive high-rise. The guild hall was on the first floor, and the upper floors were all apartments for the members. The higher your standing in the Guild, the higher floor you were on.

Dark elves, a few humans, and some lizardfolk sat in the large common room on the first floor. An older dark elf asked, “Are you here to apply, young human? Bleiz, you are always welcome to join us.”

I identified the voice from a table and approached. Four dark elves were playing cards. I moved and sat at the table with them, “No, not today. I am here actually to seek a contract for aether crystals. Tier four and tier five; around ten units each. Gorsch referred me to your Guild.”

He put down his cards, “Gorsch. Huh, we normally do not do direct sales. The city and Hall get suspicious we are avoiding their taxes. We always pay them, but they never believe us,” he smiled brightly. “Normally, I would deal negotiate with you, but Relik Fadrae said to call him concerning you and Bleiz here.”

“I am leaving soon. If he is in the dungeon, I would not have time to wait for his return,” I responded immediately. I did not want this to be complicated with Relik asking to buy my displacer beasts or recruiting Bleiz to his Guild.

“Do not worry, he is up in his apartment or in the city. Should be here in less than twenty minutes.” The dark elf said, “My name is Galaeron Eldove. I am one of three leaders of our Guild.” We shook hands and he dealt me in the next hand and explained the game. It looks like I did not have any way to decline playing and the game was simple but there was a subtle strategy.

Bleiz stood over my seat, “Storme, you should not play with this bunch. They cheat.”

Galaeron laughed, “Cheat is such a strong word, Bleiz. Using every advantage open to us sounds better.”

Bleiz went around the table, “This one will use illusions to change the cards appearance. This one spies on your hand with a scrying spell. Galaeron uses an ability called foresight to see the hands before they are played, and this one…” he paused at the last elf at the table.

She answered for him, “Slight of hand.” She pulled a dozen cards from her sleeves to show my before putting them back.

Galaeron smiled, “It is not about playing but catching the others cheating. This is a game to teach you to be observant.” I played three hands before Relik came walking in, Lorae falling on his heels. He sat at the table.

Lorae smiled, “So you are back in the city and were looking for me? Did you bring the cats?”

I arched my eyebrows, amused, “Bleiz, you can take her to the Maelstrom to play with the cats. I will be along shortly.” Lorae practically dragged the reluctant Bleiz along.

Relik nodded at me, “So, what business do you wish to do with the Duskhunters?” A pitcher and glass were put on the table in front of him even though he did not ask for it.

“I am looking for a supply of tier four and tier five aether crystals, about ten units in size,” I asked.

Galaeron smiled a merchant’s smile, “Tier four crystals that size are 250 on the market, and tier five are 1300. Demand for the tier five is increasing.”

Relik nodded to the guild leader and considered, “Tier four are easy to get from the giant alligators in the deeper dungeon. The tier five, not so much. Greater elementals have them, but they are difficult to fight, even for my team. How many do you need?”

“Eight tier five and fifty of the tier four. I can get them in Skyholme, but I was comparing prices here,” I added with my own merchant smile.

Galaeron nodded to Relik, permitting him to negotiate. “We can sell you the tier four at 225 and the tier five at 1200.” He opened his hands, “I guess you are not willing, but I would give you all the stones for your two displacer beasts.”

“That is generous of you. They are not for sale. They grow on you after a while,” I said. “I am sure Lorae will eventually get her own to train.”

After draining his cup, Relik exhaled in a long breath, “When they are so young, they are hard to keep happy. Her mother could have handled her better at this age.” There was some pain on his face at the memory, but it was not to make me feel guilty.

I offered, “I control one of the dungeons on Skyholme for three straight days during the week. Would you be interested in a day of unfettered access to reduce the cost of the crystals?” They immediately appeared interested.

The woman who was using a sleight of hand, “Where? Galaeron, a new dungeon would be a nice change.”

I decided to be honest with them, “It is a basic training dungeon. But my motives are not entirely pure. The Black Mauraders are planning to attack the floating Skyholme islands. I was hoping to have some skilled adventurers around if they attacked my home.”

“Never did like those thugs,” the illusionist dark elf said. “Never been to the floating islands either. I’m interested.”

Galaeron looked at the illusionist, “Are you going then? So I have to work out some sort of deal with the young human here?” He turned to me, “How many levels, and do you have a list of harvestables?”

“Five levels, but I have only a limited list of the harvestables. The dungeon was controlled privately, and the harvestables were not published. Older records were destroyed. There is blood marble on the fourth layer. Vinegar apples on the second. Crabs on the third,” I offered.

“We get to explore it too? I’m in!” said the woman with sleight-of-hand skills.

Relik tapped his finger loudly on the table, causing silence, “I heard your islands do not like those who are not human?” Of course, Bleiz had talked to him while he trained under Jasper. Jasper was Relik’s scout for his team.

“True, but we are opening the borders—part of the reason why the attack is coming. I offer you rooms at my estate and meals as well. If you want to explore the other dungeons in Skyholme, I can help arrange it.” The table was quiet, and all eyes turned to Galaeron.

“Relik, what do you think?” Galaeron asked the leader of his top delve team.

Relik filled and drank another mug, “I could use a vacation, and Lorae needs to see more of the Sphere. I will take my team and a team of trainees. We will report what we find and whether the Duskstalkers should invest further.”

I immediately knew he was doing this more for Lorae than himself or his Guild. “What about the Black Maurader’s attack? Will you help?”

Relik looked me in the eyes, and answered, “If they attack us, yes. Or if there is a posting in the Adventurer’s Hall for aid. So I suggest you post something. Even if it is a token amount.”

I couldn’t hide a smirk, “Understood. I can bring you all back to Skyholme on the Maelstrom if you want. It is about half a day.”

They agreed to my terms but wanted half a day to get ready. I immediately consented and used the communication stone to tell Cilia we were staying an extra half day. I heard the Princess urging her to ask why in the background, but she didn’t. Amelia would find out soon enough. I waited as they discussed details at the table. Relik’s complete team of eight was coming along with a trainee team of six. In addition, Lorae and five other support members would travel as well.

So, twenty members of the Duskhunters would be coming to Skyholme. Maybe I could convince Relik to train my own delve team as well. Either way, I had a group of experienced adventurers coming to the Spire to protect my sister and the others.