Chapter 124

As I made dinner in my apartment, a knock at my door made me pause.  I opened the door to find a smiling Delphia, “Hey, boss.  Just wanted to say high to my new neighbor.”

“What?  You moved in already?”  I asked, noticing she was wearing some suggestive clothing to highlight her curves.

“Yes.  Remy said the room next to yours was vacant.  I moved my things in today.  It smells funny and does not have any furniture,”  she said, still smiling. She was probably waiting to be invited in but

“You took Gareth’s room?  And all the furniture is gone?”  I was too confused, so I went inside and walked around.  It was barren desires a few crates.  I ignored Delphia and went to find Remy in his room.

I knocked loudly on his door, and when he opened it, I went in.  “Remy, why is Gareth’s room empty?”

Remy was confused, “He left Storme.  I thought you knew?”

“No, why is everything gone?  The sofas, beds, tables, desks, chairs…”  I asked.

Remy’s eyes were wide, “Oh, that.  He said it was his room, so everything in it was his.  He told me you would understand.”

I fumed a little. I looked at Remy, rubbing my forehead, “Remy, do you have an idea of the cost of the furnishings he took with him?”

“Maybe two hundred gold, but I think he planned to sell everything for about half that. He said something about funding his delve team,” Remy answered honestly and tried to focus me on Gareth and not on himself for letting Gareth leave with everything.

“Ok, it is fine. See about furnishing Delphia’s new room. Actually, just move the furniture from one of the empty apartments,” I mussed. Gareth was continuing to fund his delve team through me. I looked at Remy, “Make sure he does not take anything else.”

Remy was hesitant to ask, “And the restaurant? Gareth had dinner last night with two others and put it on his tab.”

I was not angry as I knew what Gareth was doing. He was testing me. Seeing what the limits were of our friendship. Maybe he was trying to get me to break me and force me to sever it. I considered my answer, “Gareth is always welcome to a meal at the Shiny Platinum on me. Let the servers know I am paying. His guests will be his responsibility.”

Remy nodded, “It will be done, Storme. I will let the servers know.”

I left the room and returned to mine to find Delphia still waiting outside, “Since my room does not have a bed, where am I going to sleep tonight?”

Her bright smile was charming, and I gave it serious thought. I was attracted to her but was still bitter about losing Aelyn and Tessa dying at the hands of Bricios. “Go and see Remy. He will get you into an empty apartment.” Disappointment appeared on her face. “Tomorrow, you can move the furnishings from that apartment to the one you selected.”

I walked past Delphia and went inside. I was going to keep the door open, and Delphia gave me a smirk, realizing it. I did my nightly routine with the cats and then started working on making long swords for sale in Llorth. I started making some minor variances. I altered the length of the blade slightly, changing the width and weight and altering the runic enchantments. I always used the durability runes, but I varied from sharpness, stamina draining, swiftness, and light for the second rune.

Most of the blades would get the runes for durability and sharpness, as that was the most useful for fighters. I was building up a steady inventory of blades for Tallot, the weapons dealer in Llorth.

We would also be returning with the last of the blood marble. I would need to have Lana come with us on the fifth day to transport the blood marble as I could not take all of it in my storage, and the Maelstrom could only take so much added mass. It would be a profitable trade run if the long swords were sold. I even had a dagger with an adamantine edge. I had only used it on the cutting edge to demonstrate I could work the material to Tallot. I placed another long blade into my storage and went to sleep after setting up my alarms.

On waking, I had my week planned out. My morning routine would remain the same; cats and sword training. Dungeon Academy would follow with tier-one creatures and my spell class. After that, I would visit healing clinics throughout the islands. I wanted to push my lesser restoration spell to level twenty-three so I could regenerate the limbs of the Wolfsguard at the Black Spire. My evenings would be focusing on my crafting and working with the cats.

The first day went as planned. I visited three clinics after the Academy, all on Titan’s Shield. Spreading the goodwill of the newest High Mage of Skyhomle. I healed over a hundred people at each of the three clinics, and I lost count. Most of the healing requests were minor but after my diagnostic spell, I could usually find two or three other issues to heal. My lesser restoration spell advanced to level seventeen. For the evolution, I expanded the regeneration of the spell, bringing it closer to being able to regrow limbs.

When the Maelstrom landed at the Shiny Platinum, I had a guest waiting for me. It was expected after my visit to the Black Spire. An angry Loriel was waiting without any guards. She was dressed in common clothes like she had skulked here unnoticed. Mia was among the guards I had on duty, and I figured she must have let the ruler in. She nodded to me in an apology.

Loriel rage subsided as I approached. It was still burning under her mask. “Storme, I would like to talk if you have time.” Her voice was pleasant and practiced.

“You can come up to my room,” I said as pleasantly as well. Adrial and Kiara zoomed ahead of us up the stairs. When I got to my door, Delphia’s door opened for a moment but closed when she saw Loriel behind me. I set my privacy screens inside my room and started making dinner. “I hope you like fried chicken.”

Loriel remained calm, “That is fine, Storme. I am not here for dinner. I want you to rescind your offer to the Wolfsguard on Stonefell Island.”

“Really? Did I break the law? I thought they were free to make their own decision?” I replied as I prepared the batter. Loriel was angry but still holding it in. She sat on the sofa and remained quiet. I fed the cats and continued with my dinner preparation.

As I was frying the chicken thighs, she asked, “Do you not care for the fate of Skyholme? Your parents, your brother, your sister? Weakening the screening fleet that is already poorly crewed would put them in jeopardy.”

“Explain it to me then. What is your plan?” I asked the young woman.

“We are bringing the Sphere to Skyholme, Storme. If we can not demonstrate strength with our skyships, another power in the Sphere will see us as too tempting of a target. We must always have twice the number of skyships in the air! We need more of everything! Skyships, aether crystal cores, and crew. Every person you take from that hurts us. The Wolfsguard on Stonefell island are important to crew the Wasp-class skyships,” she spoke deliberately.

It was still not all her plan, but part of it. She added, “It is not just Sadians. We are opening trade to the entire Sphere.” She moved from the couch to stand next to me at the stove while I tended to browning the fried chicken. “Storme, the next year is going to go one of two ways. It is a gamble. Either Skyholme will become a safe haven for trade in this entire region of the Sphere. Or we will be swallowed up in a conflict.”

“Why has this not happened before?” I asked, looking into her eyes.

“The Heart Stone protected us from scrying and teleportation,” she admitted. I still had the folder about Aelyn unopened in my dimensional closet.

“So why are you not looking for it? Where is the hunt for Aelyn and her mother? You know they have the Heart Stone,” I asked, moving the chicken to a plate to cool.

Loriel sighed, “Resources to track her down, partly. And partly because it would not save us in the long term.” She sat at the table. “The population of Skyholme has been on a decline the last three hundred years. The anti-immigration policy of five hundred years ago has eroded us as a people. Even without the Bricios revolt, Skyholme had maybe another fifty years before an economic collapse. We can not support our skyship fleet. I am betting everything on doubling the fleet and stretching our resources. Once trade starts, we should recoup the investment and be able to sustain ourselves. But we can not look weak.”

“And the Harbinger ship I refurbished for you?” I asked.

“It will be part of the patrols. And yes, it is my safety net to escape Skyholme with my people if this fails.” She slapped the table lightly, “Are you happy now? Knowing everything?”

“Everything? I doubt that.” I sat and slid her half the chicken and a cup of red wine.

“You have a role too, obviously. You are a symbol of our magical strength. We lost a lot of our great mages in the last Sadian attack.” She bit into the chicken, and her eyes went wide in delight.

“Then I am doing you a favor. I have given the Wolfsguard the opportunity to have children,” I stated.

“And you think this will solve the population issue? It will not do anything in the short term. Please suspend your offer for…” She considered, “Five years. If we can get through five years and not go bankrupt, we will be fine.”

I understood, “You can not generate enough platinum and gold from the dungeons to sustain the skyships.”

She nodded. “We are trying to lure back the Adventurer’s Guild back to Skyholme. Right now, there is just token membership there, and all the delve teams are from Skyholme. We also lack truly impressive dungeons, though. Our delve teams barely clear the lowest boss any longer.”

Something dawned on me, “The Triumvirate was seeding dungeons?”

“How did you know? I only found out a few weeks ago! They were trying to help evolve dungeons. Special teams were dropping dungeon objects obtained from the lowlands. The problem is that as the dungeon evolves, it can surprise a delve team and get them killed. But the more delvers a dungeon kills, the faster it evolves.” She admitted and finished all three chicken thighs and was sipping the wine.

“It would take thousands of deaths to evolve a dungeon,” I scoffed at the idea the Triumvirate was purposely trying to kill off the delve teams.

“They were getting desperate,” she admitted. “The idea is still on the table. One of the targeted trade goods is dungeon artifacts.” She held up her hands, “We were going to target just one dungeon, The Stary Night dungeon on the capital island, and tell the delvers. It is one of only two dungeons in all of Slyholme that produces platinum coins.”

I asked a question that had been bothering me, “Where is the Triumvirate getting the aether crystals to power their expanded fleet?”

Loriel considered how to answer, “It is mostly a rouse. A lot of the ships are just for show. We do not have crystals large enough to keep them in a true fight.”

“Thank you for being honest with me,” I said, finishing my own chicken. I sipped my wine, “I will not withdraw my offer to the Wolfsguard. It would be a breach of trust.”

Loriel’s knuckles went white on her glass as she clenched her fist, “You are unreasonable, Storme. We are going to lose two cres for the Wasps. Just delay it.” She pleaded.

“No. I think you should consider expeditions to the lowlands to find people who want to immigrate to Skyholme. Not just humans, either,” I offered.

“It would make us look desperate and show weakness. We already considered this. It has to be done slowly over time. We also do not have spare ships to send on such an endeavor,” Loriel said.

I was not going to offer the Maelstrom or my services. “I am already doing more than any citizen of Skyholme. You will need to find another solution unless you plan to enslave the Wolfsguard again.”

Loriel was angry but did not break, “Storme, I came and asked. I will not see the Wolfsguard beholden to the Triumvirate again. It is one of the reasons we find ourselves where we are today.” She stood, “If you can finish the artificing on the Wasps soon, it will be greatly appreciated.”

Loriel started to leave, seeing I was not going to concede. “Loriel, I appreciate you telling me the state of things. Although I can not change what I have offered the Wolfsguard, I will not interfere with your plans by error again. If you had trusted me earlier, this may have been prevented.” Loriel huffed and did not say anything as she left. I got work on artificing more longswords.

When I flew out to the clinics outside the cities for the next four days, I had long lines of people rushing to see me for healing. The word had spread that the High Mage would disembark and heal for free when the Maelstrom landed. It made it more efficient to expend my aether, and the local town guards had to organize the crowds.

By the fifth day, the spell had reached level nineteen. I could regrow soft tissue and bone. The last upgrade I needed was to use less of a person’s body stores for the regeneration. If I regrow a person’s leg, they would not have enough body mass for it. A hand or ear, I could do. At level twenty-three, the evolution of the spell would allow me to convert aether, very inefficiently, to biomass. It might take my entire aether pool to regrow just one person’s leg. Of course, the targets could help out by overeating beforehand and drinking and eating during the casting.

When I returned to the Shiny Platinum, Lana was there and ready with Remy. The delvers had been dropped off at the Spire while I was in classes in the morning. I was headed to the city of Llorth to trade and also retrieve Bleiz.

I moved as many blocks of blood marble as I could into my space, and we had another thirty loaded into the cargo hold. Thar was the safe limit that Leda had calculated we could carry and still reach the city on a single charge.

Even though the cats were used to flying now, they still liked to be on the bridge and watch the land race below them. The black displacer beast, Adrial, was about thirty-five pounds now. She was larger than her white sister, Kiara, by about five pounds. They were well-trained and large enough to start hunting small game themselves. I was thinking of bringing them into the Progenitor Dungeon the next sixth day to hunt the blink bunnies.

Remy was excited, “Mera made thirty casks of the frost mead as well for the trip. If everything goes smoothly, we should cover a good part of the cost for the Wolfsguard village.”

Remy was not aware I also had one hundred and seven long swords in my dimensional space. I was hoping this trip was going to be more than a little profitable, “You did good, Remy. Since the blood marble is found in the fourth floor Progenitor Dungeon, do not be afraid to sell more.”

Remy asked, “Are the teams going to go that deep? Are they experienced enough for that?”

“I have confidence we can harvest the blood marble,” I said, but I was referring to myself. I planned to try and fight the owlbear on the next sixth day. The ship started its long descent toward the lowlands and toward the city of Llorth.