Chapter 102

Gareth was upset with receiving no accolades in the form of coin.  Maybe that was why he wanted to present the pelts, to collect the reward.  I shrugged, as any reward from a small village would probably not be worth much.  “Stormy, we can’t let them walk all over us like this,”  Gareth whined cynically.

“I will talk to Othella after I check on Remy’s repair work on the landing strut.  The troll did a lot of damage, and I want to be able to land in water if we need to,”  I told my friend.

Gareth’s mood brightened, “The town is having a huge party for us.  There are some nice-looking young women as well,” Gareth’s tone changed instantly.

“Well, there is your reward.  The party, not the woman. I will tell Fera this time if you decide to sleep around,” I laughed at my friend. His grin faded, and he looked betrayed.

He finally said, “It’s not the same.  In all the stories, the adventurers get the loot and a reward,” Gareth voiced his frustration.  His whole act was all in jest at the mock injustice of it all.  He thought he was being funny, but I really didn’t have the time to indulge him.

I just patted him on the shoulder, and he left.  I diced up some raw chicken from my dimensional space and fed the eager cats in the cage.  They attacked the bowls and mewed for more.  I tried petting the white one.  It let me, but the black slashed my hand with its appendage, cutting the back of my hand.  I spent time making a separate cage and split the two up.  I gave the white one more chicken, and as it ate, it let me pet it.  The black one mewed pitifully as its sibling ate.  I tried to give the black one more chicken and pet it as well.  It bit my hand this time.  Maybe the black one was too feral, I thought while healing myself.

I left and went to see Remy.  He was under the ship. Remy was grumbling, “I patched the hole.  We won’t be able to get a new landing strut until we return to The Shiny Platinum.”  I could make one but decided not to reveal the extent of my ability to Remy.

“It is fine.  We still have five struts and can now land in the water.  Anything else?”  I asked my engineer.

“Leda said we are good to make it to Llorth.  We can leave anytime.  I will stay with the ship if you want to go to the party,”  Remy said while packing up his tools.

“No.  It is fine.  I am just going to talk with the town elder.  When I come back, you can go,” I said, inspecting his work closely.  He did a good job, and I left to find Othella.

I was directed to her home by the townsfolk and knocked.  She answered, and I entered when she gestured me inside.  The house was well kept, with shelves of books and nice furniture.  She was preparing a meal and invited me to sit.  “Here to ask for a reward?  I told your friend we didn’t have much to offer but that I would think of something.  I talked with the townsfolk, and we can pool eight gold for you.  It will be ready in the morning,” she said heavily.  I used my assess person ability on her.

Othella Ridgehome

Human Female

Age 79

Disposition Grateful

My skill indicated a person’s intentions well, and I guessed this woman was not deceiving me.  I took the bowl she offered me.  It was a rice and meat gumbo.  It was very mild and under-spiced, but I ate it anyway.  I finished the bowl and said, “No need for a reward.  The pelts will fetch more than enough to cover our efforts.  Gareth is a good sort, and I am sure his being upset was an act.  He just likes to be the center of attention.”

“Oh, he wasn’t rude or mean.  Just shocked,” she said.  We both laughed, and I could imagine my friend being shocked at not being recognized for risking his life to save the village.

I stood, planning to leave but paused to read the titles of her books. “Those were my husbands,”   she said.

I nodded as I read the titles.  Most were basics of spell magic.  Different from the books I learned from but probably containing much of the same knowledge.  Eighteen books on aether cores and spell imprinting and evolution.  A few books on local monsters.  I paged through the books after getting permission.  I found the entry for Displacer Beasts, also known as Omlarcats.  Gareth was mostly correct in what he remembered about them.  Nocturnal hunters with a habit of being sadistic in their hunting practices, torturing their prey and playing with them.

It mentioned a few ways to trap the beasts and how to skin them to keep the hide intact.  The hide was an integral component of something called a cloak of displacement.  The eyes were also used as glow stones but rotted over time.  The eyes had two uses in alchemy: night vision and true sight potions.  I fingered down to the reproductive cycle.

Mated pairs separated from the pack once a year to lair for six months to give birth to 2 to 5 kittens.  The kittens were born with teeth and barbs on their extra appendages, so they were considered dangerous from birth. The females only lactated for a week after giving birth, and then the kittens ate prechewed meat from the parents.  At six months, the cats would be four feet in length and taught to hunt by the parents.

The book did not focus on training them as pets, but it said they could be trained to be loyal guards but advised never to leave them alone with small children.  It referenced a book called, Understanding the Motivations and Body Language of Your Displacer Beast by Dar the Beastmaster.  I slid the book back on the shelf and went to the end of the shelf where there were five spell books.  Four were tier one spells and one tier two.  The tier one spells were arcane dart, arcane armor, comprehend languages and scribe.  The tier two spell was wall of sand.  The comprehend languages could be very useful as I paged through it.  It started with just an imperfect auditory translation, but as it leveled, you could get a better translation and eventually read a foreign script.

I turned to Othella, “Can I buy these from you?”

She looked uncertain, “Which one?”

“All the books.  There are...53 books here.  How much do you want for all of them?”  I had a friendly smile while making the request. The collection was excellent.

“It took my husband a lifetime to accumulate it. He just dabbled in magic. It is all I have left of him,” she entered the negotiation phase.

The spells were worth maybe 200 gold in Skyholme, but I was guessing spells were more expensive in Skyholme. The wall of sand and arcane armor were the only two rare spells. The other books I could not place a value on. But maybe five gold each, as many had color illustrations. So the entire collection would go for maybe 450 gold in Skyholme. I asked, “Name your price Othella.”

She considered for a long moment, “Two hundred and fifty gold.” She seemed uncertain if it was too high or too low.

I nodded slowly and pulled a platinum and twenty-five large gold from dimensional space. I pretended to get the coins from a pouch and placed them on the table. Her eyes went wide at the glittering coin stacks in front of her. “I have never seen coins so shiny before. There is more coin than I asked for. Are the books worth more than I thought?”

I shrugged, “To the right person, yes. I am giving you close to fair value.”

She picked one in her hand and examined it. “If you do not mind, I would like to get the blacksmith to confirm they are real.”

I didn’t understand why everyone thought shiny coins were fake. I agreed, and she took the platinum and one gold with her. I began to organize the books on the table so I could quickly add them to my dimensional storage in some semblance of order.

Five spells books, eighteen on the basics of magic, ten bestiaries part of a collection, and twenty random books on everything from cooking to masonry. The cookbook was a guide to cooking with local flora and fauna, so it was partially a herbalism book. Othella returned happy, and she took all the coins into her bedroom. I quickly sent the stacks of books to my dimensional space and left the house.

When I got back on the Maelstrom, an eager Remy rushed off to the party. I went to the bridge and reclined in the captain’s chair while reading about displacer beasts. Sammie was back from the party first and was extremely intoxicated. I heard her climb the stairs singing the ballad of the lumberjack who saved the woods from an undead horde. I went to her and helped her to her room, and as she collapsed on her bed, I touched her and removed the effect of the alcohol poisoning from her. She was sound asleep, and hopefully, the hangover would be lessened. If not, a quick healing when she woke.

I went to my room, and the black beast hissed and had his tentacles try to reach me through the bars. The white one seemed to be studying me. It was almost eerie, with off-red eyes studying me. I tried my assess person ability on the small cat, and it did not surprise me that it failed to activate. It was called assess person, not assess beast. I prepared some raw chicken from my dimensional space, chopping it finely. The black cat started pacing frantically in expectation. The white cat waited, and when I put the bowl inside the cage, it ate slowly, and I was able to pet it again.

I made some more diced chicken, and once again, the black cat took some blood as payment for petting it. I opened the white one’s cage, and it exited. I could see its indecisiveness, and it even flickered in my vision as it tried to use its ability to no avail. I walked toward it, and it shrunk away but did not flee. I picked up the cat, its tentacles hanging loosely down, as unthreatening as it could make itself. “You should be careful,” A voice in the corner of the room said. The white cat lashed out in that direction with both appendages.

Bleiz appeared and was seated on the chair. “That one is intelligent. It was her who tricked me and cut up my arms when I collected them. The black female is easy to understand.”

I put the white one back in the cage and fed both some water. They both drained the bowls dry, and I added more. Bleiz said, “I am not cleaning the cages. You might want to make collars and leashes for them.”

“I was thinking of selling them in Llorth. Maybe I will keep one. I just have not decided,” I said, ensuring both cages were secure.

“Talk to a beastmaster in the city,” he shook his head sadly. “And here I thought you were a dog person.” He stood up and walked out. It then occurred to me that my cabin had no windows, and the door had been closed when I entered. Had Bleiz been in here the whole time? Was his presence what had subdued the white cat?

I moved to the crate and tried petting it without the price of food. After a few minutes of my attention, the feline let me pet her again and appeared to fall asleep with a light purr. I whispered, “I think I am going to call you Kiara.”

The crew stumbled back over the next few hours, well past midnight. I caught most of them, removing their intoxication. Gareth was last and had a noticeable hickey on his neck. I decided he could manage his own hangover. I locked down the ship and moved to the bridge. Leda and Cilia were there but didn’t look to be in great shape after hours of celebration.

“I think I will get some practice flying the ship. Leda, help me get oriented…” I took the chair and got the ship going in the right direction at speed and altitude. I then moved to the sensor station and let the two of them get some rest. It would be about seven hours till we reached Llorth.

They both returned about six hours later, and it was my turn for a quick nap. The cats needed to be fed, and I cleaned their cages with my cleanliness spell. They both were spooked when their urine and fecal matter disappeared into nothingness. The black cat didn’t scratch me when I fed her this time. The white one gave me that same appraising stare.

I managed only forty minutes of sleep when the ship alert bell rang. I went to the bridge, and Leda was ready, “We can see the city. It is huge. It looks like they have a few defense skyships and numerous drake riders.” She handed me her telescope, and I looked at the city. We had slowed to under forty miles an hour.

I could see the drake riders and counted seven over the city. All the drakes were a metallic blue in the sun. Two massive skyships also circled the city. I had read the limited material we had access to on the city. Lloth was a major trading city over one of the ley line nexus points. They had a high-tier dungeon in the center of the city that allowed an infinite number of delvers in. This gave the city a heavy stream of resources to exploit. The races controlling the city were the Dark Elves, with sizable populations of humans and gnomes.

As we approached, Leda was busy figuring out the signals flashing from the towers around the city. They were navigational tools for incoming flyers and skyships. She had a reference book out and started giving Cilia vectors to set up an approach that would not get us attacked. She was actually sweating and finally asked me, “Water or Land?”

A breath later, I went with the land option. It was a very slow approach as we were soon directed by flaggers in towers to an open stone area. The landing area looked like a giant chessboard with seven by seven hexagons. “I think we can land on any open hexagon,” Leda said with a little uncertainty.

“Closest to the gates then,” I gave my input, but I was studying the other ships. Two looked completely metallic in nature and had modules on the hull. We were still far from a transition tunnel to the Outer Sphere, but those ships definitely looked like they might be space-worthy. Cilia swung the Maelstrom around and landed. Our ramp would face the city gate. Everyone was on the bridge except Remy. He was one of the crews I had not cured of their alcohol poisoning. Sammie checked on him, and he was just still passed out.

I gathered the crew. “Ok, we are going to leave two crew with the ship. Remy and Gareth. Cilia, Leda, and Sammie, you can explore but stay together. Bleiz, you are with me and stay visible. When Cilia, Leda, and Sammie return, Remy and Gareth can go out together. Stay out of trouble, everyone.” I looked at Gareth, who looked surprised I was singling him out. “We will lift off in eight hours.”

Everyone nodded and made their own preparations. As I descended the ramp, I was met by a dark elf with four guards in heavy armor. I was nervous for just a moment, but he was only here to register my ship and collect a docking fee. Ten gold a day or fifty gold for a week. I would have choked if I hadn’t had unlimited wealth. I handed him a large shiny gold with a hydra on one side and a Medusa head on the other side. It was a design from my book of dungeon and kingdom coins. I did not was to use Skyholme coins.

Bleiz walked next to us as we headed through the gates. Wide streets and tall buildings lined the sides. Every one was walking, and no horses were in sight. Bleiz was just as awed as I was as we walked. Mostly humans with an array of gnomes walked the street. The dark elves were sporadic but were the most richly dressed in this trade quarter.

The languages spoken were dark elf, gnome, and the common human tongue. I suddenly was grateful that I had picked up the comprehend language spell. If I was planning to visit different cities, I would need to learn the spell soon. We turned into a common goods shop run by a young gnome. We wondered about the racks to get a feel for pricing. I would say everything was slightly higher quality than Skyholme and about 50% more expensive.

We talked to the gnome proprietor, purchased a city map for two gold, and he marked the sites I was interested in red ink. The central library. All the three portal stones in the city. The best beast tamer in the city. And the spell emporium run by the Adventurers Guild.

The Adventurers Guild was an organization that was found in every city in the Sphere. It was a network of guild halls that was supposedly unaffiliated and did not have any political bias. Although Skyholme had an Adventurer’s Guild, it was definitely handicapped by the Triumvirate. Maybe that would change with the new regime. If they gave the Adventurer’s Guild power, Skyholme could see a large influx of delvers.

I walked with Bleiz to the closet portal stone. I went through the square and spread around some large silver coins for information on two female platinum-blonde elves that would have arrived three months ago. As luck would have it, a man completed a registry for the city of arrivals. He had a skill similar to my assess person ability. It cost me a large gold bribe to look at the book.

Nothing. Aeyln and Niserie had not arrived at this portal stone. The man was very helpful, though. The lower city stone had a similar registry. The third portal stone had spell locks on it near the dungeon. The city controlled that portal stone, so anyone could unlikely use it.

We spent an hour reaching the lower city portal stone, and two gold coins later, and I was disappointed. Once again, we had come up empty. This was the only city named Llorth. I was positive Niserie had said Llorth. They must have arrived near the dungeon portal. Niserie must have had the key for that portal stone controlled by the city.

We pressed to the center of the city and found the portal stone. It was in a large cage with guards surrounding it. Bleiz and I asked around, and the stone had not been activated in over ten years when the Nagas had attacked the city. It connected to one of the moons only. I spent almost fifty gold asking various people and got the same answer every time. Bleiz finally said, “Storme, I do not think they arrived in this city unless there is another portal stone somewhere.”

I had spent almost six hours tracking down and questioning people. I sighed, “Bleiz, we are close to the Adventurer’s Guild Spell Eporium. Let’s go check it out before heading back to the ship.”