Chapter 101 The Cat’s Meow

Sammie was hungry when I finally finished healing her.  “Thanks, Storme.  I am sorry I almost got killed.”

“You better be.  No, dying while you work for me,” I smiled as I hit both of us with the cleanliness spell.  Everyone was still in some shock from the short, intense battle.

Leda came down to the hold and said, “We didn’t get a large enough charge on the crystal.  We are going to have to land somewhere to charge again.”  Everyone in the hold looked at me.  I thought about just going back to Skyholme.

“That is fine.  You can land where you think is best,” I said, committing to a trip to Llorth.

Gareth sat next to me, “Mountain trolls are tough bastards.  We probably should have harvested the blood and hearts....”  I gave him a withering stare.  He held up his hands, “Just saying they are worth good coin.”

“I do not think I need the funds, Gareth,” I said with a little snark.

“Well, as team leader, I just wanted to point out we could have earned a sizable bonus from harvesting the troll,” he said but moved away, giving me space and not letting me comment on his assertion that he was the team leader.

I went to the bridge and watched the lands race below.  Four hours later, Leda started giving Cilia directions to descend.  The Maelstrom soon moved toward a small village on a lake.  We did a flyby.  Leda spoke, “Inhabitants looked human.  Cilia, circle around, and land on the beach near the fishing boats.”  she addressed me, “Storme, we should be inside the borders of the Theoreon Kingdom.  That is, if it has not been conquered since the time the map was made.  The Theoreans are fairly welcoming of outsiders.”

I nodded and watched as we landed.  I was soon down the ramp with Gareth and Sammie.  Bleiz was nearby but invisible.  An older woman with a straight back and flanked by two younger men walked to meet me.  “Welcome to the village of Serran. I am Othella,”  she spoke the common tongue with a heavy accent.  “Are you here to trade?”  she asked hopefully.

I felt calm in her presence.  The two men behind her had swords on their hips but were not wearing armor.  On the edge of the village were a number of people, primarily curious children.  The village was mostly wooden structures with a single large squat stone tower in the center.  I addressed the woman, “My name is Storme.  We are just here to rest for a few hours on our way to the city of Llorth.”

She nodded in understanding, “You are the most excitement our little village has had in a month.  You are welcome to rest here.  The central structure,” she indicated, the short stone tower, “is our town municipal defense building.  It has a small general store.  The local tavern is the building directly across from the tower.”

Leda descended the ramp.  She asked,  “Is this village still part of the Theoreon Kingdom.”  the woman smiled and nodded.

“Yes.  The Kingdom has been stable.  It mostly has to do with the land has not much to offer. No dungeons of note or natural resources.  We are bordered by mountains on two sides and an ocean on another,” the older woman explained.

Leda pressed, “Do you have any recent maps of your Kingdom?  Mine are all 300 years old,”

The old woman nodded, “In the general store.  Four large silver for the most recent. Our Kingdom is small, just 200 miles by 100 miles.  Not much, but we are generally safe from some of the more dangerous denizens in the Sphere.  But if you are adventurers, we might have a task for you.”

Gareth became alert, “What do you need to be done?” I could tell he wanted to play the hero.

The woman smiled like she had caught a fish, “We sent word to the capital where an adventurers guild is located.  There are displacer beasts in the forest across our lake.  They only hunt at night, and we bar our doors.  But if you could expedite their removal, we would be grateful.”  she said.

Gareth turned to me, “Displacer beasts are cat-like creatures with whip-like appendages.” His face focused in thought, “They are stealthy hunters and difficult to strike. I think their hides and eyes are extremely valuable,” he lectured me.

I heard Bleiz whisper to me, “Sounds like fun.”

I considered. The night was only about an hour long in the Sphere, bookended by a few hours of twilight. I finally replied, “I do not think we will be staying till night.”

The woman, Othella, was ready for my hesitation, “You can always track the pair to their lair. You seem like very capable warriors.”

I could tell Gareth was itching to go monster hunting. I had not purchased any bestiaries outside of dungeons. I would have to rectify that. I was relying on Gareth’s knowledge.

“Let me talk it over with my companions,” I finally said, and we went inside the cargo bay on the ship. I looked at Gareth and waited.

“They are big, but smaller than a horse. I can not remember if they had six legs and two whips or four legs and two whips. They are fast and powerful. Usually hunt in packs of four to six but will mate as a pair and remain stationary while they raise their offspring. If this is mated pair, they might have kittens. If the kittens are young enough, they can be sold to a beast tamer.” He thought some more, trying to remember, “Their hides are very valuable…thousands of gold valuable. The eyes glow and are used in alchemy.”

I waited while Gareth continued to remember. The only thing he could recall in addition, was the beasts preferred dense jungles or forests.

Bleiz appeared, “I think we should help. I didn’t see a single competent fighter in the village.” I discounted his input because I had learned his tone of voice. He was just bored and wanted a challenge. He had the invisibility necklace, so he would not be in much danger. I wished I had imprinted my invisibility spell but I was still working on it.

I walked back to Othella. “Have the beasts killed anyone in your village?”

She pursed her lips, “No. They appeared about nine days ago and take two sheep from an outlying farm every night. The flock was moved, and another farmer lost a horse. That was two nights ago. Nothing happened last night.” I liked the fact that she was honest with us. She could have tried to guilt us by saying a child had been killed.

“Fine. We will make a loop of the lake to look. If we don’t find anything, we will be taking off.” I looked at my crew, now all close by except Cilia. “Sammie, stay with Cilia, Remy and Leda. Gareth, Bleiz, and I will make a circle of the lake.” Othella was smiling brightly. I asked her, “Are there any local laws we need to be made aware of Othella?”

“We just expect courteous behavior while you are in town. If you want a meal, we will feed you before your trek around the lake,” she offered.

“No, I am guessing the circumference is about five miles. I want to get to it.” I addressed her.

I walked to Leda, “Keep on alert while we are gone. Always keep two people on the ship and don’t let the locals aboard.”

She nodded, “Common sense, Storme. The ship will be here when you get back.”

I left with Gareth as we started into the forest, following the edge of the lake. Bleiz would be somewhere in the trees scouting ahead. Gareth kept going over what he remembered. The whips had barbs on them for grappling prey. It was best to avoid getting snared. If this was a mated pair, only one would be sent out to hunt while the other watched the kittens.

When we got near the far side of the lake Bleiz whistled, and we honed in him. He was in a shallow ravine with a horse carcass. It was mostly stripped and smelled foul. Bleiz whispered, “The displacer beasts will be hunting tonight. This corpse is stripped.”

I walked around the site, and when I found a paw print, I thought about turning around. It was massive, larger than my head. Gareth was standing next to me and took a deep breath, “I think we should head back, Storme.”

I nodded and climbed up the small ravine with Gareth. We started to backtrack when Bleiz sent a signal whistle. It was the signal for danger. Gareth tensed and we both started scanning the trees and got out backs to a massive trunk. Gareth said, “If it is just one I will go right and attempt to cut the whip appendage off on my side. You do the same on yours.”

It was just on twilight’s edge, and we spotted the cat together. It was coming from where we found the carcass. It was huge, easily taller than Gareth at its shoulder. It was studying us with glowing green eyes. “Maybe it is afraid of us,” Gareth whispered. As if in response to Gareth’s words, it started closing on us at a leisurely pace.

“It has six legs and is definitely bigger than a horse,” I said, stating the obvious. I only had three signals with Bleiz, Danger, I am here and Run. Each was a different type of intonation of the whistle. He was quiet, so I guessed he assumed we were going to engage. I added, “Three whip-like appendages, not two.” I felt the need to correct Gareth at this time.

“What? No, I can only see two. Oh, the tail? That doesn’t count, Stormy,” he sounded exasperated but had lost some of his tension.

The black cat got within forty feet, and I fired a lightning spear, and it passed through the cat. It paused, surprised, and then lept at us. I went into overdrive mode. Gareth rolled right and yelped in surprise. I was swinging my falchion to try and sever the appendage coming at me on the left. My cut passed through flesh, the barbed pad was removed, and the cat hissed in pain. I could see that the other appendage grappled Gareth, but his sword flashed, and now the cat was angry at both of us and couldn’t decide who to pursue.

I circled toward its flank, and its massive head followed me. It lunged impossibly fast, all six legs working in concert. Even with my insane speed, I did not get out of the way. The massive jaw missed me, but the shoulder and mass of the beast plowed into me, sending me tumbling away.

At this time, Bleiz made his presence known. He appeared and cut the hamstring on one of the rearmost legs. Gareth’s broadsword was chopping at one of the middle legs. I regained my feet and used a flash heal. The black cat roared into the air, sensing its demise was imminent. I ran forward, planning to keep its attention while the others finished it off. It worked, and soon the beast was down to just three functional legs.

Gareth intoned, “Let it bleed out, Storme. Keep your distance.” The malicious green glowing eyes followed me as I kept out of its range. It pulled itself forward, but soon its strength left it.

Gareth ordered Bleiz, “If that roar was to call its mate, you should go and scout.” Bleiz vanished. He looked at me, “Stormy, will you do the honors?” He pointed at the corpse.

With the eyes still glowing green, I fired a lightning spear at the beast to make sure it was dead before approaching and using my tissue extraction spell. The eyes and the pelt were removed in seconds and sent to my dimensional space. I asked, “Anything else of value?”

Gareth thought and shook his head, “I think the blood, but it soaked into the ground. Pretty much all magical beasts have blood usable in alchemy. But I do not remember what this blood was good for. The hide was by far the most valuable part. I think the eyes glow for years, but they do rot.”

“What about the flesh?” I asked. My spell was exceptional at cutting perfect cuts of meat. Gareth shrugged. I took cuts of sirloin and tenderloin into my dimensional space. The tissue was not as fatty as a cow, so I was not certain of the taste. I was considering what else to cut off when Bleiz used the whistle for danger.

Gareth was already on guard, and I backed away from the dead displacer beast. A smaller version of the displacer beast we had killed appeared. It did not approach the corpse but did lock eyes with Gareth before turning and running. Gareth started to sprint after it. I followed him, activating my overdrive mode again. A whistle told us Bleiz was also in pursuit. With a heavy breath, I asked, “Gareth, are you sure there were just two of them?”

“Probably. They are nomadic and range unless they are giving birth.” He was barely winded as he continued, “There could be two mated pairs in the same region, but that would not make sense as Elijah said they would not want to compete for resources.” He added, “But I may be wrong, Stormy. I mean, I could even remember how many appendages the beast had.”

The cat had outpaced us, and I pulled up. Gareth stopped as well. I ended my enhanced reflexes and walked slowly. Bleiz appeared and started tracking the fresh prints. We spread out to either side of him as we made our way cautiously through the thick woods in the twilight. We turned away from the lake, and about a quarter mile into the woods, Bleiz suddenly stopped and kneeled down low.

Bleiz sniffed the air, “We are close. I do not see the lair, but I can smell the rotting meat.” He passed his hand in a small arc, “Somewhere in that direction.”

I made some aether discs to make steps to reach a branch in a tree for a better view. The roots of the largest tree in the direction Bleiz had indicated had a black hole in them. I returned to the ground, “I think the lair is underneath that large tree. There looks to be a tunnel. I am going to throw a flash-bang inside to see if I can spook it out.”

I cast my alarm spell on a rock and tossed it in at about thirty feet. It went off, and loud cat hissing issued forth from inside, and the displacer beast lept out of the tunnel, its tentacles lashing wildly in search of us. I started firing my lightning spear, missing more often than hitting, and Gareth and Bleiz unloaded their throwing daggers. I started using my iceball spell but still missed it often. The beast was projecting an illusion of itself, so it was more like guessing where the beast actually was. After a minute of being subjected to our attacks, the beast raced forward blindly, wanting a target. It was not difficult to avoid the charge.

It was pitiful as we slowly destroyed the beast’s legs as we had down with the first. It was clear my flash had blinded the beast completely and probably damaged its hearing as well. It must have been looking right at the stone went it went off. It had to be one of the most useful spells I had learned and evolved.

The cat started mewing when it was immobilized, and Gareth pierced its throat with his blade, ending it. I moved in and harvested the same parts I had from the prior displacer beast. I was ignoring the soft mewing coming from the lair. It had to be the kittens.

Gareth produced the light stone Wynna had gotten him a year ago and made to enter the tunnel. “Gareth, is that wise? Couldn’t those things be dangerous?” I asked.

Gareth seemed indecisive and looked at Bleiz, who rolled his eyes and went invisible to do the task. Ten minutes later, a bleeding Bleiz had two pitifully mewing black cats. He was holding both tentacles together with each hand. The squirming cats were hanging by their own tentacles. One of the cats was pure white with deep red eyes. The other was back with glowing green eyes like its parents. Even though the small creatures looked helpless, they had bitten and torn Bleiz’s flesh with their barbed appendages and sharp teeth.

He tried to hand the black and white cats to Gareth, who wanted nothing to do with the little monsters. I produced some rope, and I tied their tentacles together and wrapped the barbs. The needlelike teeth were an issue, but I bundled the body tightly, restraining the six legs. I healed Bleiz and turned to Gareth, “Are you sure these will be worth something in Llorth?” I asked for the fifth time.

Gareth shrugged, “Yes. If they can not be trained as pets, they can always be raised for their pelts. Although I didn’t know they came in different colors. I thought they were all black.”

I ended up carrying them back as Bleiz was our invisible scout, and Gareth wanted to keep his weapons at the ready. I had one tucked in each arm, their soft glowing eyes staring at me as I walked. The albino cat with red-pink eyes seemed more curious. The black one seemed more feral. They finally fell asleep, and for the first time, they appeared cute.

I walked onto the ship and spent time making a medium-sized metal cage in my cabin for the little fiends. Gareth took the two pelts to show the town we had killed the displacer beasts. When he returned, he stormed into my cabin and angrily tossed the pelts down on the floor.

“Stormy, we never negotiated a reward for getting rid of their cat problem!” Gareth said irritably.