I sat on the bench next to Aelyn.  I just couldn’t take the effort of standing.  It was more the damage from the overdrive of the spell than from Callem’s beating.  Callem sat next to me and announced, “We are ready!”

A short man came into the room and looked around, and then moved and gave Callem a folder.  He handed it to me.  “There should be a place for each candidate.  They will come inside in order.”  We waited a few minutes before a tiny girl entered.

I looked at the first page and asked, “Lana?”

The timid girl nodded, “Yes.  I am a porter.  I just graduated this year from the general academy in the lower city.  I have two spells.  One is a dimensional space, and the other is invisibility.”  She had gotten some confidence during her explanation of her abilities.

“How large is your dimensional space? Do you have any open space on your aether matrix?” I asked, curious.

“Three feet by four feet,” she said confidently.  “I don’t know if I have more space.  The spells I learned were borrowed.  I can’t afford spellbooks.” I guessed the space might be suitable for a new graduate and a porter, but I needed porters capable of bringing out large trunks of trees.

“Do you have experience gathering resources? Wood? Copper? Iron?” I asked to hope to find something to make her more appealing.  She shook her head no.  I said, “Thank you for your time.  If we consider you, we will contact you.”

After she left, Callem spoke, “Not much combat training on that one.  If you want, I can set up a reading with Wynna for her.  We can send her a token for the skyship, and she can meet Wynna in Hen’s Hollow.”

“The only way I would consider her is if she could learn the dimensional closet spell.  Her space is too small for the large-scale operations I am planning,” I informed Callem.  He looked at her sheet in my hand.

“She is an orphan...see no parents listed.  Look how far she came on her own,” Callem lobbied for the girl.  I gave him a sour look.  There had to be better candidates than Lana.

“If she has an aether matrix of at least 18 then I will consider her Callem.  I need her to be able to grow.  I don’t mind supplying the spell books,” I said, prevailing to Callem’s pleading eyes.  He really did have a soft spot for the downtrodden.

The following two candidates were busts.  They were both front-liners.  They did ok with my questions and had both attended dungeon academies, but when Aelyn spared with them, it was obvious they had trained only to face monsters.  I had fully healed Aelyn. I still had quite a ways to go on myself before I would test the combat abilities of candidates.  Also, their sword forms were not great, and they didn’t adapt well to variation.  Even Callem seemed disappointed, “Well, I guess they could be trained, but I would pass.  Both seemed a little inflexible in their combat thinking.  Probably a product of an academy that teaches dungeon critters always do the same thing.”

My next interview was with a mage.  He was attending the dungeon academy in Aegis city and was in his fifth year.  When he entered, he had dirty blonde hair, brown eyes, and a crooked nose.  He was Aelyn’s height.  “Oliver Klozoff,” he bowed.  “I hope to interest you in my unique set of spell works.  I have four camp defense spells, *alarm, light, shadow sentry, and vermin shield*.  I have one offensive spell, *arcane spear*.  I am also currently working on the *rain of ice spell*.”

Oliver seemed promising, but he had focused on his magic and wouldn’t be good in a straight-up brawl. Also, comparing his spell list to Talia’s, I was underwhelmed. I managed to say, “Thank you for your time. You are an impressive mage. If your skills mesh with our needs, I will contact you.” He seemed reluctant to leave but eventually did.

Four interviews down, and I was exhausted. Four candidates, and so far, nothing. Callem supplied, “Storme, there are four registered guilds in Skyholme for Dungeon Delvers. Most of the candidates in the Delving Academy have already joined one of the guilds before graduating. You are looking for the hidden gems.” I paged through the remaining seven profiles. It was going to be a long afternoon.

The next two candidates were busts. A male scout and female front-liner. Callem didn’t like the way the scout moved and fought. The female front liner was too pompous for me to like her at all. It was like I would be doing myself a favor by hiring her. That just rubbed me the wrong way.

I was shocked when the next candidate was an elven male. He bowed and introduced himself as Gimble. He explained he was a dungeon explorer and interested in dungeons in Skyholme. He had all the required paperwork to work in Skyholme. He just hadn’t found any takers. “I have been in Aegis city for a month, and your people don’t take well to outsiders.” He looked at Aelyn and her mark.

“I haven’t been able to travel from this city, and I am getting frustrated. I am an experienced scout, over thirty-eight dungeon dives among seven different dungeons,” he added. I looked at Callem, who had been studying the elf with intensity.

Callem intoned, “Aelyn, test his skills.” She jumped to face the male elf, and we watched an intense display of swordsmanship on both ends. Aelyn faltered after two minutes, and he got a death blow on her neck, stopping before drawing actual blood. He held the blade at her neck for a brief moment before sheathing it. Aelyn’s eyes were wide and contemplative as she was in shock at losing.

Aelyn moved to sit next to me in a trance, and I said, “Don’t feel bad. He is quite good.” She shook her head, clearing her thoughts, then looked at me.

“He knows my mother,” Aelyn said deadpan. Gimble face twisted in surprise at her admission. Aelyn added, “He is here to free me.”

Gimble was assessing Callem and decided not to make a move and spoke, “I am a member of The Hand of the Crimson Moonriders. I am here to free Aelyn. A favor to your imprisoned mother.” Gimble took a few slow breaths. I knew the look he had. He was deciding how effectively he could fight against us.

I decided to defuse the situation, “If I could transfer the ring to you, I would. But it would have to be reset by the mage who branded Aelyn.” Aelyn cringed at the thought. “I wish for Aelyn’s freedom as well. Do you have some way to remove the mark yourself and take her with you?”

“Yes. Once we leave the city’s anti-teleport range, I can bring her to someone who can remove the mark,” he said confidently.

My heart was conflicted, but I was ready to say yes, but Aelyn spoke, “No.” Everyone was confused. “I will not go with him. I am not sure if he is telling the truth, and I don’t need rescuing.”

The three males in the room looked at each other confused, and Gimble spoke, “I can assure you I am a friend of your mother’s. I have known her over a century, and I can even bring you to your brother’ in Cullibar.”

“I said no!” Aelyn intoned. I was about to speak, but Aelyn said, “No!”

Gimble was at a loss for words but eventually said, “I can remain in Skyholme for a few months. If you change your mind you can contact me.”

I tried to salvage the situation. “Gimble, are you still interested in being part of my delve team? Just while you wait on Aelyn to change her mind,” Aelyn’s glare at me had me cringe.

Gimble thought for a moment, “Terms?”

I breathed some relief, “Housing and meals. Five gold a week for one delve a week. They are resource delves. Exceeding quotas by 30% gives a 20% bonus.” I watched his face as he thought about it. Damn, he was hard to read. The only active part of his face were his eyes.

“I am not allowed to leave Aegis city, and I can only delve the two dungeons here. As long as those are the targets, I would be amenable to the contract as stated. I can not commit to a long-term contract as I may be called away by my superiors,” Gimble finished.

I pulled out a shiny platinum and handed it to the elf. He flipped it in his hand studying it. I said, “First 10 weeks pay. The other half is for your loggings and food for ten weeks. I expect to have my team’s residence completed in the docks in ten weeks. The first delve will be once I have completed my team. So far, I only have one mage and yourself.”

Gimble studied me, “And you do not plan to join any expeditions?”

“No, I do not. With your experience would you be interested in being my leader?” I asked.

He smirked, “Well, aren’t you the crafty one? My experience is real, and I assume I am going to be leading a bunch of novices?”

“Most likely,” I said, watching the elf. How did he not show any emotion or body language?

“Two conditions. First is Aelyn is to be assigned to my team,” he started, and Aelyn started to protest

I said, “Agreed,” overriding her arguments and fury creeping into her face. Well, she did say she wanted on my delve team.

“Second condition is I want approval on my group’s members,” he finished, and I went into thought. At first, I was irritated as I was aware my face showed my contemplation clearly. Even Callem couldn’t hide his body language as well as this elf. But did I really want to give an outsider say in the team composition?”

“No,” I finally said. “You will work with the members I hire. Your job is to train them and keep them alive. As you said, your time is limited in Skyholme.”

His impassive expression broke a little, “Agreed.” He paused, then turned to Aelyn. “Aelyn, as your delve leader, I wish to train you in another training room.” Aelyn looked panicked, but I just motioned for her to leave with Gimble. I doubted Gimble was even his real name. Aelyn pouted but let with him.

Callem spoke as the door shut, “He is a good fighter, but I am guessing his true skills lay elsewhere.” Yeah, spies were like that, I thought. “I think Aelyn will be ok. He was difficult to read.”

A knock at the door, and the next prospective delver entered. Three more duds, and we were on the final profile sheet. The muscled figure that entered the room confused me for a second. Was this a male or female? I thought the figure had breasts but I wasn’t sure. I looked at the sheet, Sammie Blackhawk. Callem was studying the new applicant. The person was square like Callem but young. When they turned to close the door…definitely had breasts…or really big pecks.

It was the voice that gave her gender away, a feminine voice, “Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. My name is Sammie. I have not attended any academies. I spent the last five years as a lumberjack. My mother thought I could do better for myself.” She paused and looked at us.

She wasn’t tall, just slightly shorter than my own height. Her sheet didn’t even designate her desired role on a delve team. I asked, “are you applying as a front liner or as a porter?”

Sammie thought for a moment, “I can swing an axe with power, but I have no combat experience. I hope to learn how to fight, but in the interim, I can hopefully be a porter.” She sounded resigned.

Callem leaned into me and whispered, “I will test her. I am guessing she has an ability or two from her size and movements. I think this might be your hidden gem.”

Sammie had decent instincts as Callem ran her through some basic attacks. Sammie’s pitiful counterattacks made me sigh. She had a long way to go, but I could see potential, as Callem had mentioned. Sammie got frustrated and took a two-handed overhead swing at Callem. Of course, she opened herself to a killing blow by the action, but Callem let her swing and blocked it.

Callem grunted on blocking the powerful swing. Ok, definitely an ability there to make Callem strain. A few more swings and Callem called a halt. Sammie’s eyes were misty, thinking that she had just failed to make the cut.

She rasped, “I can still be a porter. I couldn’t beat the old man, but I can still carry….”

I interrupted her, “You did great, but don’t call Callem and old man. I will hire you as a front liner. You will also serve as a porter and a lumberjack.” Her face was twisting from emotion to emotion as she learned she had in fact, been hired. “Your pay is five gold per week and housing and meals.”

Sammie caught up and couldn’t understand, “Five gold coins? A week? I won’t do anything besides delving,” she sounded dubious.

“Callem, can you go and get Gimble and Aelyn?” I asked, and he nodded with a grin.

“So Sammie, you have five weeks to learn the basics of combat from the team leader. His name is Gimble,” I said with a smile. It did feel good to give people a chance to improve themselves. Callem, Gimble, and Aelyn reentered the room.

“You?” Gimble laughed, seeing Sammie. “Guess we will get the chance to work together after all.” The laugh from Gimble had thrown me off. His entire demeanor had changed. Like a switch had been flipped. Was this an act or his true persona? Gimble continued, “We have talked the last few days in the common room. Never got your name, though.”

“Sammie,” Sammie supplied.

“Well, it looks like I am going to be training you.” He turned to Callem, “This is one of the two individuals I hoped to bring onto my team.”

I asked, “And who is the other?”

“A healer. He is working for the Skydragon Dive Guild. He is miserable and hates his guild mates. He is only 14 and just has the *healing hands* ability,” Gimble supplied.

“Can we poach from a guild, Callem?” I asked.

Callem looked thoughtful, “The Skydragons run three of four delve teams, I think. I really haven’t followed the delve teams. If the rules are the same, then you can buy out a person’s contract…if that is what he did.”

“I will figure it out,” Gimble said, moving out of the room.

Aelyn and Sammie started talking, and I could hear Aelyn explaining the mark on her neck. It was clear that Sammie didn’t receive a standard of education. She didn’t strike me as being stupid, just innocent. I reached into my pocket and pulled some coins from my dimensional closet. Nine large gold coins and ten large silvers. One platinum total, the same as I had given Gimble.

“Sammie here is your first five weeks’ pay and five weeks’ worth of housing and meals. Our center of operations is being built. Stay close to Gimble and keep your coins close to your person,” I said placing the coins in her hand. Sammie’s eyes just stared. Aelyn thankfully pulled her off to the side to councel her on her instant wealth.

Callem stood next to me, “Definitely a gem there,” he indicated Sammie. I will go and get her some tokens to come to Hen’s Hollow to train a few times. I will also get Lana a token.” Callem’s eyes were lively, watching Sammie like he had watched Gareth the very first time he taught us the basics. Poor girl.

Gimble returned with a young man. Even though he was 14 he looked closer to 12. He was older than me but looked younger. Probably from malnutrition. Gimble introduced the young man, “This is Remy. He is from the lowlands. He was a merchant’s son. His father went bankrupt on a trip here five years ago. His father disappeared along with his ship. He was staying at the inn when these events took place.” I looked at Remy. He was definitely meek. But if he was abandoned at age 9 then I could only imagine the struggles he went through.

“What is his buyout?” Callem asked, returning with a fistful of skyship tokens.

Gimble faced Callem and said, “Two hundred and thirty-eight. He is getting two gold off his debt per dive. But then needs to eat and accumulates the debt back.” He wasn’t indentured.

I asked, “With healers in such demand was has no one paid off his debt already?”

Remy answered with a soft voice, “I only have a weak healing ability. It is just tier 1, only slightly stronger than a tier 1 magic spell.” He sounded defeated. He didn’t value himself.

Callem was talking to Gimble and handing him the tokens. Sammie and Aelyn were also talking, leaving me Remy. “Remy, do you have any other abilities, spells, or skills?”

Remy shrugged, “I don’t know. I awakened just over a year ago. The healing ability just manifested.”

“Are you interested in joining my delve team?” Remy was looking at Gimble for direction. The elf rogue had some charisma when he wanted to use it. He had probably been gathering information in the city since he arrived a month ago.

I missed the interaction between Remy and Gimble, but Remy said, “Yes, I would.”

“Excellent. Gimble, here are some coins to buy out his contract and Remy’s pay. I am trusting you with their well-being,” I placed four platinum coins in his hand. He didn’t look and just pocketed the coins.

Gimble said, “Callem said to send Sammie, Remy, and Lana to Hen’s Hollow next 7th day.” He was grinning. Not being able to read the elf was making me feel uncomfortable. I would need to find out some more information about his organization, The Hand of the Crimson Moonriders.

It was another hour of socialization before Callem, Aelyn, and I left.

Callem spoke, “Not bad, two scouts, two porters, a healer, and a mage in a single day. Your delve team is shaping up.” I didn’t want to say that I was missing the core of any team, the front liners. Baby steps, Storme, baby steps.