Chapter 119

Ullmark sat uneasily in my apartment. He had a dour look on his face. I got him a drink and asked, “So, what can you tell me about this dungeon? I know it is a good source of aether-enriched soil.”

Ullmark drank, “It is called the Progenitor Dungeon. Or at least that is what the Bricios called it. Do you know how Wolfsguard are created?”

A pit in my stomach formed, “Yes. They captured wolfkin females from the lowlands and bred them with a human in dungeons to form a half-breed, the Wolfsguard. The only way two different races can have offspring is by having the dungeon aether-enriched environment assist them.”

Ullmark nodded solemnly. “They usually capture the younger ones. None are willing.” Ullmark looked terrible. “It is one of the reasons I left the service of the Bricios. I worked for one of their subordinate families responsible for the dungeon and Wolfsguard program. I could not stomach it any longer.”

“I thought you were a good man,” I said reassuringly.

He shook his head and looked me in the eyes, “No, I am not. I participated three times. I told myself I was ordered to, and that was why I had done it. It started me drinking, which is why I lost my family. They were better off without a monster like me around.”

I was at a loss for words. I definitely had a different opinion of Ullmark now, much lower than before. “Why are you telling me this?”

Ullmark fidgeted, “Guilt. Regret. Maybe I want you to condemn me for my acts and kick me out. I am the happiest I have been in a long time. I look forward to each day, but my past hangs over me like a dark cloud.”

We sat in silence, and I did not know what to do or say. I had planned to talk about the dungeon and not this. I did not know what happened to the wolfkin females after the Bricio departure. I thought they were released and sent back to the lowlands. I finally said, “I can not give you what you seek. If you want out of my service, that is fine. I suggest you seek your absolution from the Wolfsguard or wolfkin affected.”

Ullmark remained silent, thinking over his decisions while I waited. “I would like to remain in your service and seek them out if possible.” He inhaled, “If they want to punish me, I will welcome it.” I nodded, knowing what that meant. He would let them kill him.

“You can go with Remy and Isla and talk with the Wolfsguard on my estate tomorrow morning.” I stood and retrieved some paper, and sat. “What can you tell me about the Progenitor Dungeon?” If I was going to lose Ullmark, I needed to pick his brain about the dungeon.

Ullmark nodded, “The Progenitor dungeon is seven levels. The first level is the meadows. It is where they harvest aether soil. Unihorned goats and blink rabbits are the monsters. The blink rabbits are not too deadly as they usually jump and appear in front of you but just use a shield to protect your throat, and you won’t have trouble with them. The goats build up speed quickly and try to impale you on their horn. Quite painful when they land a strike.”

“Harvestables on the floor? And the dungeon challenge monster to proceed to the second level?” I asked while taking notes.

“Yes. A lot of alchemy herbs and flowers. I was a harvester, but you have to wonder a bit to find them. Not sure about the potions they went into either. Lachlan should probably come with to identify them.” He motioned for a refill, and I filled his glass. “The final floor challenge is a hippogriff. It is half horse, half eagle. It flies and is as large as a horse. It feeds on the blink rabbits on the floor, but for some reason, when you fight the flying hippogriff, the blink rabbits harass you from every direction.”

I did not remember reading about hippogriffs in my teir one monster texts. “Are they considered tier-two beasts?”

Ullmark nodded, “Tier-two. It is not a difficult challenge as long as you have a lot of ranged attacks in your group. Once it is grounded, it is easy to handle too.”

“Ok, let us talk about the second floor then….”

We talked well into the night as I took notes on the first four levels of the Progenitor Dungeon. The dungeon’s fifth level was where the blood marble came from, but Ullmark never ventured that deep with his team.

After Ullmark left, I cursed my back luck. Ullmark was a good dungeon leader, and I sensed that I would be losing him one way or another. With Gareth gone, my best delve team leader was probably Talia—or I would have to take a more active role in delving myself. The cats were mewing for their dinner and playtime before bed.

I was up early, with little sleep. I grabbed my prepared breakfast and lunch. As I exited, eating an egg, cheese, and bacon sandwich, I found an irate Loriel waiting for me. Gammon and four guards were at her side. “You are up early, Loriel,” I said and started walking toward the Dungeon Academy.

“May we talk?” she rasped angrily.

“You can join me on my walk to school,” I said, trying to figure out for which reason Loriel was mad at me. Based on what she revealed, she would tell me what Isla was feeding her.

Irritably, she sped up to walk with me. Two guards went in front, and Gammon and the other two behind. The civilian traffic parted in front of us as we walked. Loirel started, “You are tearing down the warehouse to build a park?” She tried to mask her anger.

“Yes, the trade port of the city needs some beautification,” I stated while finishing my breakfast.

“You have a warehouse directly adjacent to the skyship docks, and you are building a park!” Not so much restraint this time, she said, “We are about to open trade to a hundred cities from the lowlands. Opportunities abound for profit, and you are planting trees!”

“I like trees,” I said in mock defense. “And there will be flower gardens too. How did you know?”

“Because, you idiot, I was petitioning for a second portal stone to be installed inside the warehouse!” She fumed.

That made me stumble slightly. That would have been immensely valuable, but then I thought through the implications, “I doubt you were going to let me keep the warehouse then.”

“It would have been yours, and the Triumvirate would have rented it from our esteemed High Mage!” She gritted out.

I guessed, “That sounds awfully generous. Where is the catch?”

Loriel was still fuming. But as we got closer to the Academy, she stated, “I would have asked you for half the profits for making it happen. So, will you consider not having the building demolished this morning?”

I stopped walking and faced her, “If you had told me earlier, maybe. Now, I have too much going on to start changing plans. You only gave me the building because you always thought you would get a portion of it back.”

Loriel’s eyes betrayed her. She tried, “This new portal is only going to connect to the Sadian Capital of Goldreach. Putting it away from the heart of Aegis City is part of the discussion as to whether to have it in the same city as the master key portal.”

I understood the master key portal was the ancient portal network connected to the thousands of portals throughout the Sphere if you knew the correct sequence. There were twenty-three runes, all of which had to be activated in the proper sequence to connect. That meant there were hundreds of millions of combinations. You could activate the portal with aether and select the runes in order or use a portal key already attuned to do it instantly. This was the one they had moved from where the Heart Stone was kept. I was told the runic stones were being moved to the upper city somewhere.

“They can just find another place to put it,” I finally said.

“This could have made us thousands of gold, Storme. Don’t be stupid. Change your plans,” she almost begged.

“What are you not telling me?” I asked, looking down at her.

Loriel looked constipated. “It is a plan that will help Skyholme thrive for long into the future. Our partnership with the Sadian Emperor must be preserved for it to succeed. He is paying for and constructing this two-way portal.”

“If he wants this, then is it an attempt to take over Skyholme? Gain a foothold with this portal,” My voice had skepticism in it.

“No, reconsider, please,” she pleaded again.

I spent long moments considering, “We can build a building at the back of the park for your portal. Is fifty feet square big enough?”

Loriel twinged slightly, “No warehouse to store goods would make things problematic.”

“Fifty by one hundred feet at the back of the lot. A small warehouse on one side and a portal on the other. And you do not get a share of any profits,” I added.

Her eyes stormed at the last. “Thirty percent of the fees Skyholme will pay you.”

“I am paying for the construction of the new building, so, no,” I stated to her disbelief.

“Then I could just have it built somewhere else and find another civilian to own the building. You were an attractive option because of your status as High Mage. Twenty-five percent,” she made her last bid.

I considered, “Will you help with the construction costs of the new building?”

“I do not have any coin. All of my assets are leveraged,” she laughed darkly, “This was exactly how I brought down the Bricios. The irony if I fall for the plot.” I laughed internally as well. Loriel had used her influence to bankrupt the Bricios, forcing them to take action to maintain their power.

“Agreed. But after I settled my estate in the Black Spire. Send the specifications to Isla. She can design the building and will be happy about the work.” We shook on it, and before Loriel left, I asked. “Since you are here, I have some questions about the Wolfsguard.”

“They are your problem, Storme. They can work your farms for you and are quite good at it from what the reports have indicated,” Loriel looked like she had better places to be after our negotiation.

“Can they fight? I mean, they said they took an oath to never wield a weapon in battle. Has that been lifted with the new laws?” I inquired.

I caught the panic in her eyes. She had probably thought about me using the Wolfsguard to get my guard count up, but most were crippled and would not meet the standard set in the defense contract. “Yes. Wolfsguard are now free citizens of Skyholme and are not bound by that oath. They can leave the islands if they wish as well.”

I did not let her leave yet, “What happened to the wolfkin females? The ones they were using?”

Loriel had a distasteful look and hard eyes. She obviously did not like the fate of the wolfkin women. I had to like her just a little bit for that view. “Some went to the lowlands. Some are on Stonefell Island with the Black Guard.” A flash of insight and disgust in her eyes, “You will not be allowed to resume the program.”

I angrily said, “That is not why I am asking. Do I have permission to talk with the ones still on the island?”

“Why?” Her tone had switched to curiosity and interest.

“You do not tell me everything, so I do not need to tell you everything,” we had a staring contest.

“They can speak to you if they want. The ones that remained are either too ashamed to return or wished to raise their offspring in Skyholme with the other halfbreeds.” Loriel finally answered.

“Can Wolfsguard reproduce in a dungeon? Like how they were created?” The question just came to me. I knew Wolfsguard were born sterile but had a thought that maybe a dungeon’s aether could overcome this.

Loriel bit her lip. “What have you been reading from Neelan’s library?” I had mild surprise on my face. “It is not a big secret. I keep an eye on you, and I know a number of books have been sent out by the healing mage to be copied and are then delivered to the Shiny Platinum.”

It made sense, even though it made me even more uncomfortable around Loriel. I admitted, “I talked with the Worlfsguard at the Black Spire yesterday, and many of them are struggling. They lack purpose. I thought the possibility of children might help them.”

Loriel looked at me funny, “The Wolfsguard at the Black Spire are old.” She paused, considering everything I had said. She obviously had not looked into the Wolfsguard there too much because about half were graying or gray, but the rest were younger, maimed but younger. She finally said, “Yes, it is possible. It is not common knowledge, and Wolfsguard are prevented from being dungeon delvers, so they do not discover this fact.” She studied me. “The reason is the second generation has less loyalty and is not as easily controlled. I personally do not care, and it would be better coming from you than me.” She studied me, “It appears I am not the only one who plans to shake up Skyholme. Is there anything else, High Mage?”

“No. I am good for now, Loriel. Always a pleasure talking with you.” I tried to genuinely smile, but I do not think she believed it. We parted ways, and I continued on to the Academy.

I was excited to tell Bleiz that if he wanted to have children he could. The conversation with Asger would be interesting as well. I think everyone expected the Wolfsguard to eventually die out, but maybe I could prevent that. And if, over time, they became more independent, they could possibly have their own society. It was not like they needed to remain in Skyholme either; the Sphere was a massive place.

I got a lot of looks in the tier one creatures class and spell class. They were too afraid to ask me questions, so I just focused on learning and asking questions. After classes, I went and talked with Neelan about limb regeneration.

Neelan sat thoughtfully, “I can not do it. There are a handful of people in the capital. The greater restoration is a tier four spell that can do it as well as the tier five regeneration spell. Your lesser regeneration spell can do it as well, but it takes a much greater amount of aether, and you need to evolve it a number of times to do so.”

“How does it work though? What is the most efficient way?” I asked, seeking his understanding similar to how he helped me maximize my aether investment for other healing spells.

Neelan grinned, “Limb replacement is easy if one side is intact. Then, as the healer, you can picture the negative image of the other limb while you are regrowing the current one. It guides the regrowth. Otherwise, you can let the body’s memory do the work. It will take three times as much aether, though. Most healing mages have to do regrows in stages as the aether investment is so large.” He looked me over, “Are you close?”

“I need three more evolutions. I wasted a few evolutions in earlier spell’s development when I should have focused on the regeneration track. It is level fifteen, and I need to reach level twenty-three.” I laid it out.

Neelan whistled, “Level twenty-three? That could take months, even for you.” He thought for a moment. “There are free clinics where healing mages practice on those who can not afford magical healing. If you wish, I can give you a letter of introduction, and you can travel to them in the cities across the islands in your fancy ship,” he smiled broadly.

“Yes. That would be welcome.” The Wolfsguard healing had been a huge uptick in the spell, and if I could do that across every major city, maybe I could speed up the process. Neelan spent half an hour putting together maps of the cities and writing the letter of introduction for me. He even said I could skip helping him in combat classes on the fifth day if I wished to visit the clinics.

The warehouse had been demolished in one day, and they were hauling away the debris. I thought Loriel might have tried to stop it, but I guess we reached a compromise. Since she insisted on having a warehouse attached, I assumed that she was either planning to sneak things to the Sadians or from the Sadians.

Remy and Isla were waiting for me when I returned to the Shiny Platinum. Both were eager, but Remy beat Isla, saying, “They were really happy to get everything, and I did not bring enough, and they need so many other things. Can I make another trip?”

“Did they already move to the farmhouse?” I asked.

He shook his head, and Isla answered for him, “No, they were still at the shanty town. The farmhouse was cleaned out, though. I did a walkthrough and have some plans for it. Who is going to be living there?”

“I hope Mera and Fera’s brother. They were going to ask him, but I have not heard yet.” Isla was bouncing to speak again, and I motioned her.

“I found a great spot on the far side of orchard for the village and two small farms. It is the only place with a large stream. I think it would make the most wonderful setting with the orchards on one side and the forest on the other. I already have sketches that I worked on this afternoon.”

“This looks great, Isla. Loriel is going to be sending you another project as well. At the back of the demolished warehouse, we are going to build a small building. Loriel will send you what she requires of the designs. You can design and get her approval for the final designs. We will build it after we are done at Black Spire,” her face lit up.

Isla informed me, “Much of the stone from the warehouse is going to be diverted to the Black Spire for the stone mage to work with. Still, I need more funds to start ordering materials.” That was always the case.

I think Loriel was hoping my funds would dry up, and I could not afford a skyship. I wanted to focus on my spellcraft over making coins. I also planned to have one hundred long swords ready for sale in Llorth when I returned for Bleiz. Hopefully, they would be salable, and that could cover some of my Skyholme expenses. I passed Isla five more platinum. I shrugged and hoped that was good enough for now. All I had left in my space was about a thousand gold and three thousand silver. Tomorrow, I was making long swords and not coins.

Remy interrupted, “There were two Harbingers parked on your cradles at the Black Spire. I talked to the captains, and they said you were doing their refurbishment this sixth and seventh day?” I got a headache from that news. Of course, I asked for them immediately. With that great news, Remy snuck out. Probably go on a spending spree.

I spent my evening with Isla, discussing her plans for the Wolfsguard town. It was going to be a busy weekend. I also needed to get the dungeon teams ready for the Progenitor Dungeon on sixth day. “Did Ullmark come back with you, Isla?”

She looked at me, “No, he said he was staying at the Black Spire to talk with the Wolfsguard.” Well, hopefully, he was still alive when we got there on the sixth day.