Chapter 74 (Arc 2 Chapter 28)

We gave Fera a few minutes to stare around in awe at the dungeon before moving into the forest. Without Talia’s ranged assistance, the large bees were slightly more difficult to deal with. Fera had a staff, and Gareth was working with her, encouraging her to strike a bee. When she finally got one of the bees, she was beyond excited and gained confidence. I continued to secretly use the bee’s stringer to train up my *neutralize poison* spell.

When we approached the first hive, I asked Gimble, “Are the hives all going to be in the exact same location as last time we were in here?”

Gimble approached and said, “Some dungeons just reset and cycle. Some dungeons make changes, so it is not easy for delvers to pass the level each time.”

Gareth yelled as he cut a bee in half, “This dungeon just resets. That is why delvers can run it so quickly. All the levels just reset.”

I nodded, “Ok, everyone. Let’s start mapping where the hives are near the dungeon entrance. If we can map out the closest hives and hit them quickly, then we can leave and make two runs every visit.”

Gareth offered, “You can just buy the map in the adventurer’s guild hall for a few gold coins. I would suggest getting maps of the entire dungeon, though, as it will be about ten gold for all five levels.”

I produced a large gold coin and tossed it to Gareth, “You can get it when we get back.” Gareth caught it with a flash, and it disappeared into his pocket.

We started making faster progress. Gimble cautioned us to keep our wits about us as we got slightly bolder in taking on more and more bees at once. Fera got stung on the third hive when Sammie and Gareth got overwhelmed. She crumpled, “So cold,” she rasped. I moved to Fera and used my spell to remove the poison. She recovered as the others handled the bees, Gareth clearly taking out his anger on the bees for stinging Fera. It was less than a minute before she stood, “Thank you, Storme, my muscles just sort of locked up.”

“It is ok, Fera. I know it is hard the first time you get stung. After a few times, your body figures out how to continue functioning through the coldness and pain,” I offered in support. Everyone gave me strange looks, so I explained, “I have been training my spell up by stinging myself from the dead bees.”

Gareth nodded, “I thought you were trying to harvest the poison glands, Storme. They are extremely fragile, and you really need a spell to reach them and retrieve the glands. I think the spell can be found in the first-floor challenge monster about 10% of the time.”

“You can get spells from challenge chests on the higher levels,” I asked Gareth.

Gareth nodded, “It is rare, but dungeons have a massive variance in rewards. There is a whole class of adventurers that just log floor rewards to see how likely they are to be found in dungeon chests. I have a book that details the chances for all the dungeons in Skyholme if you want to borrow it,” Gareth offered.

I closed my eyes and searched all the dungeon books I had purchased and materialized one in my hand from my dimensional storage, “This one?” I asked, holding up the book and reading the title, “*Statistical Analysis of the Chest Rewards for the Dungeons of Skyholme*.”

Gareth’s jaw didn’t work for a second, then he said, “Yes, this is it, and it is the seventh edition. Mine is just the fifth edition, so yours should have better information. Are we going to attempt the floor boss on this delve?” Gareth asked excitedly.

I ignored him for a moment and opened it to the page for the Icy Vault dungeon, and looked at the first floor.

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| **Icy Vault First Floor Reward Chest** | |
| Sample Size 366 | |
| 100.0% | 3 gold, 3 silver |
| 9.3% | Spellbook: Surgical Harvest, Tier 1 Healing spell |
| 24.0% | Frostskin Gloves |
| 35.2% | Frostskin Boots |
| 35.2% | Seeking Shot Slingshot |
| 0.5% | Anomaly |

I looked at Gareth and asked, “So it is always the same amount of coin?”

Gareth nodded, “Yeah, entrance to Skyholme dungeons controlled by the Triumvirate are usually priced at the cost of coins you would receive from the first two floors. You also have to give exchange those coins for Skyholme coins when you leave the dungeon.” I remembered that. I looked down at the item descriptions.

* *Surgical Harvest (tier 1 healing spell), remove an object or organ from a deceased creature or person*
* *Frostskin Gloves, sizes to the person opening the reward chest. Extremely durable and gives minor resistance to cold.*
* *Frostskin Boots, sizes to the person opening the reward chest. Extremely durable and gives sure footing.*
* *Seeking Slingshot, increases accuracy.*

Gareth moved to look over my shoulder while the others pulled out the wax filled chambers. Gareth said, “The surgical harvest is a popular spell for delves. Stronger monsters have aether crystals in them and it makes it easy to get them out with out cutting them out.” He tapped the two clothing items and left a blue smear of bee blood in my book, “Sorry bout that. These two items are both some sort of white leather. They are extremely comfortable from the accounts I read, but they get dirty so easily and cannot be dyed.”

I focused my cleanlness spell and cleaned the blood from my book. Gareth said, “See no problem for you. The gloves and boots are popular in the capital. I think they go for around 50 gold each. But the sales are taxed by the Trivumverate around 20%.”

“How about the spellbook?” I asked curiously.

Gareth squinted, thinking, “Forty gold, I think. It is a very common spell.”

I nodded, “So I could just buy it. I think I remember seeing it at *Kali’s Spells and Cantrips*.”

Gareth sensing that he was losing me from trying to attempt the floor boss carried on, “Storme, you would look really good with white gloves. And with your cleaning spell, they would always be white!”

I could see Aelyn smirking at Gareth’s efforts. Gareth turned to Gimble, “We could take down the hobgoblin Gimble, right?” Gimble looked over from scanning the sky for more bees.

“If Talia was here, then I would think we could safely handle the goblin village and the hobgoblin chief. We should wait till we have her back in the group,” Gimble said in an even tone. I was waiting for Gareth to argue, but instead, he nodded and dropped it.

As we continued to harvest the beeswax cells at a good pace, I asked Gareth, “What does anomaly mean in the reward chest? It is rare, showing only twice in 366 delves.”

Gareth shrugged while stabbing a bee on his sword and flicking it away, “Usually, it means the dungeon is awarding something typically found in a chest from the lower floors of the dungeon. But it could mean almost anything. Dungeon essence, double loot, no loot, something completely useless. I think anomalies occur more frequently if you solo a dungeon.” Gareth pointed out the next hive in the distance with his sword.

“I think after we hit this hive, we will exit and reset the dungeon,” I stated, and Gimble nodded. Gareth charged forward, to Sammie’s dismay, as she followed him. He wasn’t being reckless. He just found this was the easiest way for the bees to focus on him. He felt it was his fault that Fera had gotten stung.

When we finished the hive, we made our way to the exit with good speed. We had just about matched our first honey harvest, and with some work, we could double it. As we exited the dungeon, the two guards were standing and talking with a man in armor. A nearby backpack indicated he was clearly a delver. Probably getting ready for a long delve…nope his body odor assaulted me as I got closer. He must have recently exited.

I turned to Gimble, “You all can head back in and start again on the hives. I want to see if this delver has time to answer some questions.”

Gimble looked at the delver and then at me and said, “If you are not with us after we finish the first hive, we will exit.” Fera and Sammie did look a little tired.

I nodded and turned my attention to the delver, that was looking at me curiously. When I approached, he asked, “Are you the new delve team in Aegis city?”

I held out my hand to shake and did so, “Storme Hardlight.”

“Roarke,” we shook. “The guards were telling me you are focusing your efforts on the first floor?”

I nodded, “Yes, we are trying to get honey in significant quantity.”

He chuckled, “Bee careful! It is not in any of the books, but the dungeon hates it when you just focus on the bees. You might spark a swarm.” My eyes went wide in, and I planned to run into the dungeon to get my team out. “You don’t need to worry. It takes around twenty delves of only harvesting the bee’s honey to initiate a swarm. The last time it happened was twenty years ago, but it did wipe out an experienced party. All the bees from the woods just attacked the group.”

“Thank you, that is valuable information and saved us from possibly doing the same.” I took a large gold coin from my storage space when I put my hand in my pocket and passed it to Roarke.

He flipped the coin and pocketed it to wide-eyed guards, “No problem. The dungeons are alive, and don’t let anyone tell you any differently.”

“So, how far did you go with your team?” I asked, curious about the experienced delver’s mission.

“We always work our way to the third floor and kill the frost moles down there for their aether crystals. The frost goblins riding them are not too challenging, but those mole teeth and claws are vicious. Each one gives a decent red crystal, usually four of five units worth. Every once in a while, you can find a goblin leader riding a pack leader and get an orange crystal. That is an easy six gold.” He shifted his stance. “We usually spend about ten hours before returning hunting. Since you are new, you should know that if you spend any more than twenty-three hours on a single dungeon floor, the dungeon gets—antsy. It tries to get you to leave or advance by increasing the threats you are facing.”

He thumbed his finger at the entrance, “We usually have three teams enter every time we make a reservation. If you have quality teams, they can reach the second floor in a few hours, letting the next team in, and then we can merge on the second or third floor. That way, there is almost no danger to us. It was nice talking Storme, but I have to get to our guild house, shower, and celebrate.”

I watched him walk away, and one of the guards said, “Roarke is the guild leader for the guild *Inevitable Carnage*. One of the better men that delves. He usually only loses a team member once or twice a year, and he takes it pretty hard each time.” I nodded and logged the guild and man in my memory. I returned to the dungeon to catch up with my team.

Once again, Gimble let us know when it was time to exit. We more than doubled our harvest from last time. Just like Roarke, my team smelled terrible, and they made their way to the bathhouse. Most of the showers were working in the *Shiny Platinum*, but I still needed to work on increasing the water pressure.

I left my team to clean up while I cast my *cleanliness* spell and continued to the restaurant. I went to the warehouse and emptied our harvest of wax and honey. It was more than twice our first delve. We had plenty of containers to store the honey. Remy had ordered two hundred casks that could hold 12 gallons each. About half had already been delivered. I collected six cooks to get them in to get the honey into the barrels and melt the wax between the walls.

The delve team returned clean and in great spirits, and I had the cooks prepare food for them and let the alcohol flow freely. In the middle of the celebration Mera returned from her apprenticeship with the brewer and joined us. I made a show to give Fera six gold coins, the amount I paid delvers for their one delver per week.

I stayed late and returned to my room alone. Remy knocked almost immediately after the door had been closed and handed me the harvest catalog for the delve. 96.2 gallons of honey. I smiled. We had just made a profit on delve. If we sold the honey outright, that was about 110 gold. Remy had detailed the delve team, which included myself, for a weekly expense of 52 gold, and 19 silver. That didn’t include weapon repairs and taxes if we sold the honey, but this was much more promising than I had thought it would be.

A drunken Gareth knocked, “Stormy! Let me in! Where did you go? People are asking after you.” I opened the door, and he stumbled into the room. I touched his neck and cast *neutralize poison*. He halted his stumble and shook his head, getting to his senses.

“Bloody demon’s piss Stormy! Do you know how much I have to drink to get drunk? All that work, and now I have to start over!” Gareth fell heavily on my couch. “Why are your couches so much nicer than mine?”

I rolled my eyes at him. He was 13 going 20. “Gareth, the good news is we actually made a profit on the delve. Not having to drain the honey out of wax saved us a lot of time, and we doubled our harvest.”

“That’s all well and good, Stormy, but the celebration is just half done. Come and join us!” Gareth begged. “Mera was asking after you when you let,” he winked, but it just came off as creepy from the man-boy.

“We return to Hen’s Hollow for the second term tomorrow night. The restaurant opens tomorrow, and I need to have a clear head to make sure that it goes smoothly. Hopefully, after tomorrow it will run itself,” I advised Gareth,

“Fine! Can I tell Gimble to get token’s for every seventh day? I don’t think Fera will want to try a dungeon again, but she may have changed her mind after you gave her six gold!” Gareth sounded excited. “Sammie also came a long way today. We are working much better together. I hope we can try the dungeon boss next seventh day,” He asked with his best puppy dog eyes.

“Yes, if Gimble thinks it is a good idea. I should have your sword finished by then as well,” I said, and the good news overload had Gareth rolling off the couch and giving me a bear hug. Gareth forgot all about dragging me back down to the party and went to find Gimble to make sure he got tokens for every seventh day.

I sat down on the couch after setting my alarms and arcane locks. I pulled out my *thermostaic aura* spellbook and started studying. I added a privacy bubble when noisy people started to go to their rooms. I put the book aside a few hours later and worked on Gareth’s sword, finishing it. Before going to sleep, I created a number of gold coins for Remy so he could pay the bills when I returned to Hen’s Hollow for the week.

I managed to get my exhausted body to my extremely comfortable bed and fall asleep.

I was woken by my alarm spell. It triggered when someone knocked. The image the spell displayed in my mind was Talia with a young man standing behind her. It must be the seventh day, and that must be her alchemist friend she wanted me to hire.

I cast my cleanliness spell and made my way to the door. “Talia, I said as I opened it. You missed all the fun yesterday. I assume this is your alchemist friend? I have much to do today so let us start this interview!” I tried to sound as upbeat as possible, but my body ached from the eight-hour delve.

Talia had a bright smile but excused herself from the interview. The man had a sweaty palm when I shook it, “My name is Lachlan Cade. Talia said you were looking for a good alchemist?”

The truth is I didn’t think I needed an alchemist at all. “Perhaps. Tell me what you can do for me that makes it worth paying you six gold a week?”

“Six gold a week?” He seemed to consider. I interrupted his thoughts.

“That is six gold for a full day’s work, Lachlan. I am assuming you only get one day off per week to work for me. What did you have in mind?” I asked carefully.

The young man shifted, still uncomfortable, “Oh yes, that would make sense. That sounds fair.”

I grumbled, “I still have not been given a good enough reason to hire you. What can you offer the *Shiny Platinum*?”

He sat taller, “I brew an excellent *topical healing salve*. It can close wounds quickly to prevent blood loss.” My stare didn’t help the young man’s confidence, “I have an alertness potion. If I had higher-tier ingredients, I could extend the effect from 1 hour to 4 hours. It helps sharpen the mind in that time.” I still wasn’t impressed.

He fumbled, “I found a reference to *Frost Berry Mead* in the academy library.” My eyes opened in interest, and he rushed forward, “The ingredients are the honey, frost berries, and stinger gland from a queen bee. All found on the first level of the Icy Vault!”

Interested I asked, “What does the potion do?”

He sighed, a little defeated, “It is kind of useless but tastes fantastic and is extremely intoxicating, according to the texts. The potion makes the imbuer warm and cozy in almost any cold climate. The effect lasts for eight hours, and the shelf life of the potion is 180 days.”

I churned over the information in my head, “How long does it take to brew this potion?”

Lachlan pulled out his notes, “The yeast from the queen’s gland works extremely quickly. It takes about two hours to turn a gallon of honey and berries into *Frost Berry Mead*.”

“So it is a one-to-one conversion? Is no water added? If I just turned the honey into mead, then I could get four gallons of mead for every gallon of honey.” I asked.

“No water is added,” he said morosely.

“Do all the levels in the dungeon have similar potion recipes? It seems this was intentional by the dungeon,” I asked curiously.

Seeing a chance, Lachlan got excited, “Yes, most dungeons do something like this. The *Icy Vault* dungeon has supplied potion recipes for each of its five levels.”

“Excellent! You are hired. You can request materials from Remy to equip an alchemy lab in a corner of the brewery. I want you to copy all the recipes from all the Skyholme dungeons and beyond. Compile them into a book and get it to me,” I said. I had no plans to get into alchemy but having a list of the ingredients that made the potions would help us identify what we should focus on harvesting. None of the text I read said anything about the queen bee’s glands.

He looked like he wanted to object but just said, “Thank you.” Shook my hand and left to find Remy.

A somewhat useless alchemist but maybe the Frost Berry Mead would be a big seller in the restaurant. I went down and helped get ready for our first opening. I lightly guided the kitchen staff, and when the doors opened, I eagerly went to see. The first customers into the restaurant shocked me. Lorial Miaden, Bylura, Isla, Tess Torrent, Leda, and Cilia. They were all together and sat at the same table. Lorial’s massive Wolfsguard stood directly behind her, keeping an eye on others entering the restaurant. I decided to go and say hello to this unexpected gathering.