Chapter 83 (Arc 2 Chapter 37)

We tore through the dungeon and planned to record our largest harvest of honey and wax.  After we killed the first queen bee, I found that my spell couldn’t lock onto the poison gland.  Gareth’s overly aggressive attack had ruptured the sac.  When the spell didn’t find a viable target, it wouldn’t activate.

We were much more cautious about the second queen bee, and I was able to cast the *tissue extraction* spell.  All I needed to do was focus, and the spell removed the stinger, freed the gland beneath from tissue, and cut an incision to make collecting easier.  I retrieved the rubbery marble-sized sac.  I dropped it into a jar and placed it inside my dimensional space, easy peazy.

Our pace picked up, and we were able to collect three out of four glands from the queen bees.  I was getting decent spell experience for *neutralize poison* and *tissue extraction*.  We got a little reckless with our pace and had a few stings.

My *tissue extraction* spell reached level five by the time we reached the clearing for the goblin settlement.  My spell evolutions were *skinning* at level 2, which would completely detach the hide of an animal.  At level 3, the evolution was *butcher*.  This evolution let me extract one cut of meat from an animal.  At level 5, I took the *remove bone* evolution.  This cuts all the tissue around a single bone and lets the castor just pick it up.  Each cast of spell could do all the evolutions at once, so I could get a bone, cut of meat, the hide, and one organ with each cast.

Clearing the frost goblin camp went quickly as well.  When we were ready for the hobgoblin chief, I was held back in reserve this time to handle any unforeseen issues.  Aelyn and Gimble were on the flanks when the boss and supporters emerged.  Once again, the shaman delayed his appearance.  Now that we were aware of the ice ball spell, it didn’t take much to dodge it.  After two guards were downed, Gimble moved to engage the shaman, and I joined the attack on the hobgoblin who had incurred multiple wounds from Ullmark.  The battle was surprisingly orderly compared to our first attempt, and Ullmark said that was normal.  Once you knew what to expect in a dungeon, it rarely changed.

My spell did quick work to harvest the small aether crystals as they appeared as an organ for the spell to extract. After the goblins and hobgoblin were done, the spell reached level 6. I was not sure why this particular spell was leveling so fast. It had to be because I was using it on dungeon creatures. When I asked Gimble and Ullmark, they just shrugged. I planned to ask Selina during classes tomorrow.

Gareth asked anxiously, “Gimble, who is opening the chest?”

Gimble looked at me, and I pointed at Aelyn. Gimble announced, “Aelyn is going to open it.” Aelyn hearing her name, looked up, confused. Gimble rumbled, “Get to it, girl.”

Aelyn held up the frostskin boots and the three gold and three silver from the chest. I smiled, “Aelyn, they are sized to your feet, so you can put them on and keep them.”

Ullmark added, “If we ever venture to the fifth floor Aelyn you will want to wear those. The fifth floor is a frozen lake, and it is difficult to stand.” After the excitement of the chest, we collected the trash items that Ullmark indicated. Ullmark looked at me, and I nodded, so Ullmark announced we were going to the second level and try our hand at some boars.

At the arc inside, I noted that there were six delvers on the floor ahead of us. We entered and arrived at a different location than last time. Instead of a straight hallway, the hallway went about 30 feet into a T intersection. Once everyone was through, Ullmark took over.

“Ok, everyone with the boars on this level needs a pair in front to blunt their charge. If the boars have a long-running start, we must all retreat to the hallway corner. They can not turn when charging. When they build up speed, they become unstoppable,” Ullmark informed the group. I saw Gareth smirk and knew he was thinking of trying to stop a boar’s charge.

We started wandering the maze, and Ullmark was leaving chalk marks pointing us back to our door. He told the group the dungeon would erase the marks in 23 hours. We actually turned the corner, and a boar surprised us—well, it was a mutual surprise as the boar was uncertain what to do before lunging with its tusks at Gareth.

The boar was not small, its shoulder coming to Gareth’s waist, and the tusks were six inches long and thick. Gareth blocked with his sword but was thrown off balance by the beast’s power. Sammie cut into the boar’s shoulder with her axe. Sammie managed to keep hold of her axe, immobilizing the boar and allowing Gareth an easy slash at the spine, disabling it.

Gimble called out, “Nice work! We have one more coming from this side passage, so retreat to the intersection.” We all moved together, and when the boar reached the corner Ullmark and Gareth engaged it. This fight was more bloody as it took multiple blows to bring down the beast.

I was allowed to harvest the aether crystals from the boars, livers, hides, tusks, and some select cuts of meat. The spell was guiding me, but I had never butchered a boar before, so I knew I was only doing an adequate job. The tusks were the same tusks that Antal had molded my very first dagger blades from. Antal was an excellent shaper of bone, and he had made my small bone carvings of monsters that I cherished growing up. Maybe he would be interested in making models from the tusks to be sold at the *Shiny Platinum*. He could display them alongside my bronze figurines.

We started to move cautiously through the maze and backtracked a few times when Ullmark ordered it. When we were paired, I asked him if the boars were the only monster on the floor as I had remembered something about rats. “No, Storme, traps on this floor will have you fall into a chamber below. In that chamber are usually a half dozen large mole rats. The trap is obvious as the floor gets steeper as you approach it. The mole rats are difficult to deal with as their mouths have an acidic glue that allows them to latch onto you, and then their sharp claws tear easily into the flesh.”

“There is always a small reward chest for clearing the trap room, but the danger is not worth it,” Gareth added from the front of our procession.

We had taken down six boars when we finally found a second arch. Ullmark pulled out a map and thought for a bit then said, “Ok, Gimble. We are in the northeast corner of the maze. I can lead us to the floor boss or to another exit.”

Gimble pulled out his time-keeping device, “It has been over eight hours. I think we should head back.” I just nodded, and everyone did look tired. My dimensional space had a fair amount of honey and boar parts. We used the gate to return.

The guards acknowledged us, and our group returned to the *Shiny Platinum*. The restaurant was packed with a few people waiting. I dropped off the honey-filled wax cells in the brewer, the boar meat and liver in the walk-in freezer, and the boar hides, tusks, and miscellaneous items in the warehouse. I found Remy in his room studying the *Wind Splitter* manual. I sent him to log the harvests.

I went down to the kitchen and showed a cook how to set up a slow smoker. We would replace the worst-performing menu sandwich with a BBQ pulled pork sandwich. I had decided the menu would never have more than 23 items. I was back in my room after a few hits of the *cleanliness* spell. With Gareth’s room adjacent to mine, I could hear them celebrating a successful run. I cast my alarm, arcane locks, and privacy spells and opened my lightning spear book on my comfortable couch.

I was interrupted by Remy an hour later. Remy just gave me the catalog of the harvest and potential revenue. It looked like we had done well. Maybe a ten gold profit after paying the team and expenses. I created a large gold in my palm and flipped it in the air. All that work for something I could create in just moments.

I returned to my studying. It was late in the evening, and I decided to take a skyship back to Solaris City in the morning and then walk back to the academy barracks. That way, I could sleep here. After creating my mithril and going through all my mental and aether exercises, I cuddled under my soft sheets. Almost immediately, a loud knock on my door set of my spell alarm.

I didn’t recognize the old man that the alarm spell flashed into my head. I opened the door ready for anything. “Storme Hardlight?” The old man asked. I nodded. He held out his hand to shake, “Rippon Kirkwood. Sebastian said you needed a shaper.” I shook his hand and used my *assess person* ability.

*Rippon Kirkwood*

*Human Male*

*Age 94*

*Disposition Neutral*

“Please come in,” I said after confirming his identity. The man was clean-shaven and had messy shoulder-length white hair. His body seemed wiry and strong as he entered in some simple and unfashionable clothes. Rippon looked around the apartment and decided on the couch instead of the hard seats at the dining room table. “I was not aware you were coming. Sebastian said he would track someone who might be interested but didn’t say when or who.”

The old man grinned, “Yeah, I went to Hen’s Hollow after talking with Sebastian this morning, and your parents said I could find you here. They were discussing moving to Aegis City.”

My focus on Rippon drifted, “My parents were what?”

Rippon smiled knowingly, “Your father received reassignment yesterday. They were discussing his modest raise and if they should move to the city to make it easier for his guard duty.”

I nodded; Tessa must have come through. “Rippon, Tell me of your qualifications as a wood shaper.”

The old man relaxed into the cushions, “I have built over a hundred merchant and transport ships in the civilian yards. I retired five years ago and have been bored out of my mind. When Sebastian asked to meet with me, I might have even agreed to help at the naval yards. Then he told me some young man was planning to build a high-speed light transport. I decided to meet you for myself.” He motioned with his hands, indicating, and here we are.

If Sebastian sent him, then I thought I could trust him, and he also indicated he didn’t like the navy for whatever reason. “I am trying to stockpile the materials now,” Rippon fidgeted, “but I would be willing to hire you starting immediately. What are your terms?”

A small grin formed on his face. I could tell the old man was eager to start building skyships again. He thought for a moment, “I will need an apartment in the city. Nothing fancy. A gold a week and also an aether battery once we start construction.” I nodded. An aether battery was used by people who had small aether cores so they could cast more spells. It was very inefficient and took time to recharge your core from one.

I countered, “You can have one of the apartments in this building. I own the building, and there is an apartment open somewhere. You can have as many meals as you want for free at the restaurant and bakery below. I will pay you three gold a week.” I pulled a platinum from my storage and handed it to him, “For your aether battery. If you remain with me until the skyship is complete, you can keep the aether battery.”

The man’s eyes got wider and wider as I continued to speak. He shook his head. “I have been using my skills to make furniture these last few years. I would have probably paid you to take me on! Don’t worry, I am an excellent shaper. One of the best in Skyholme, just not the fastest any longer. I accept your offer!”

“Fantastic! Let me give you a tour of the facilities and find you a room,” I said with excitement. Maybe we could accelerate my timeline if I could get Rippon and Remy working soon.

We started the tour in the hangar. Rippon was slightly stunned and asked for additional lighting to be added, but other than that, the space was perfect. We walked into the adjacent storage room next, which had our recent dungeon harvest. I told him that most of the apartments were for my dungeon team. I introduced Rippon to our guards. We moved up to the brewery above, and no one was here, but we sampled some ale Mera must have made earlier today. She was getting better.

The next stop was the large recreation and training room. We then moved to the apartments. I found an open one and handed him the keys. The apartment was fully furnished, and he was extremely happy with it. Our next stop was Remy’s room. We found Remy counting out silver coins for deposit. The manual was open on his dining room table with pages and pages of notes.

“This is Remy. He is going to be training to be the engineer for the build,” I said with a smile. The old man looked skeptically at the young Remy. I reassured him, “Trust me, he is more than capable. Since you have connections, maybe you can bring him by the civilian shipyards and show him around?”

Rippon seemed to be studying Remy, who had gained a lot of confidence in his managerial role and didn’t shy away from the inspection. Finally, Rippon said, “I haven’t been to the yards in a while. It would be good to reconnect with some old friends. Do you want to tag along, Remy?”

Remy nodded, clearly excited. I stood, “Great! I will leave you two to get acquainted.” I pulled a few large silvers from my pockets, “For your expenses. Also Remy, Rippon is going on the payroll starting today, and his rate will be three gold per week. Make sure and introduce him around so the restaurant staff knows who he is.”

I returned to my room eager to get some sleep but had trouble as the excitement of hiring a shaper kept me awake. I eventually pulled out my spellbook and fell asleep studying it.

I was late returning to Hens’ Hollow as I had overslept and missed the transport to Solaris. I spent a gold coin getting private transport to Hen’s Hollow. Aelyn apologized as she hadn’t realized I was in my room when everyone gathered to fly back in the morning. Since I had not attended the party in Gareth’s room, they assumed I had already returned on my own.

I was punished for being late by having to help with dishes after breakfast. It actually gave me a chance to talk with Freya. Freya relayed the good news I was already made aware of. Father had been called to Aegis City to serve as the east dock captain. He was getting a pay bump but was actually going to have to do less work. He was just in charge of six men who logged all skyship arrivals and departures. He was still working on convincing our mother to resettle in the city. I told Freya that I would charge our parents a very reasonable rate for an apartment—free.

Freya kept asking me how I had managed to get our father the promotion. She wasn’t stupid. I had been asking her just last week how I could get our parents to move to Aegis City. I just told my younger sister that I had made significant sacrifices.

In lessons with Selina, I asked about the rapid spell advancement of the *tissue extraction* spell. She didn’t think the dungeon environment played a role. Combat definitely plays a role in rapid advancement but not the dungeon itself. We spent some time puzzling it out, and eventually, the answer was simple. I had been subconsciously using my *mend flesh* evolution, *diagnose other*.

This spell gave me a clear mental map of the creature and made the tissue extraction spell work more efficiently. It was not unusual for two spells to synergize like this. In order to get the rapid leveling, you needed to cast both spells in succession. I had been so used to casting the diagnostic aspect of my *mend flesh* spell I didn’t even realize I was doing it.

During the rest of the week, Gareth couldn’t help but talk about his upcoming date with Loriel. We were both going to meet Loriel and Tessa at Loriel’s apartment next to the Skyhold Citadel. We would then be escorted by a half dozen Citadel Wolfguard to the *Sowing Festival*.

On 3rd night out at Twin Rocks my *aether shield* spell reached level 13 and got an evolution. I added a third shield. What was great about this evolution was Elora and Elijah didn’t realize I was working with three shields most of the evening, and I surprised them multiple times.

On 5th night they decided to get some revenge for my trickery two nights before, and I managed to imprint my lightning spear spell as I was reaching for a ranged combat option as they cycled around me. I caught Elijah in the chest and burned a hole through his leather chest piece. We stopped and looked at the circular hole. It had burned his leather armor and singed his shirt underneath—a completely underwhelming result from such a cool named spell. The armor was made from a dungeon beast which made it more resilient, but I was still disappointed.

The first evolution of the spell was to increase the speed from 75 mph to 150 mph. With Elora and Elijah, we worked on dissecting the spell. It looked cool—a blue-white lightning bolt speeding toward a target. It didn’t have much impact on a tree, with just a burn ring in the bark. At the second evolution, I increased the energy of the bolt. Now it burned about an inch into the tree, and left a smoldering fire.

I kept casting until I reached the third evolution, increasing the power again. Now the hole was almost two inches deep. We tried the spell on a boar’s tusk, and it burned about half an inch into it. Elijah encouraged me to continue increasing the power of the spear so I could eventually burn through a skull. A headshot would be an instant kill if I could reach the brain. The problem was the aim was not easy. There was a lot of deviation after five feet. I could see why the mage who owned the spell before I had been frustrated.

We ran out of practice time and returned. I was definitely going to work on leveling this spell in the future. The next spell I planned to work on was *absolute time*.

The rest of the week quickly passed and we were ready to leave. Gareth had us skip dinner so we could reach the capital sooner. We had to talk a skyship to the lower city and walk to the upper city. Then Gareth had use the communication stone to call Loriel. Bylura came and escorted us to Loriel’s entrance. I was really doing this.