Chapter 79 (Arc 2 Chapter 33)

This was Freya’s third trip on a skyship, but just like Gareth and I, the excitement hadn’t worn off. She was at the railing and watching the lands fall below as the ship moved toward Aegis city. Gareth was in a deep conversation with Callem, so I stood beside Freya.

“How are you doing, Freya? You have been doing an excellent job in getting the restaurant supplied,” I offered with enthusiasm.

Freya’s face brightened, “It has been fun. I like visiting all the farms and setting up contracts. After the Gaskills signed on, everyone else was eager. I have been hitting the increased quotas for the *Shiny Platinum*.”

I asked my younger sister, “Do you think I can convince our mother and father to move to Aegis city?” I wanted to get my family close to where my skyship was moored in case we had to flee the sky islands.

Freya looked perplexed at my question, “I don’t think they could live in Aegis city. The prices are so extreme. Mother just got her master carver’s pin, and I think she is considering opening her own shop. Father is not home much. His duties have doubled as some of the skyship guards under his command have been reassigned to the larger cities.” I nodded and sighed internally.

Convincing my parents would not be an easy task, “What about you, Freya? Would you want to move to Aegis city next year? I will be in the dungeon academy, and Pascal will be in the guard’s academy.” I disagreed with my brother’s decision. I would have offered to pay for his education, but he wanted to follow in our father’s footsteps. By going to the Aegis guard academy, he would have a long term of service after he graduated.

Freya was considering my question. She had a small business empire and employed almost every child under the age of 13 in Hen’s Hollow. But I also knew the amount she was getting from the contract of supplying the Shiny Platinum put those funds to shame. After turning the question over in her mind, she asked, “What did you have in mind?”

Freya had a look on her face like she was ready to negotiate. I put on my own devious face, “I figured you could rent one of the apartments at the *Shiny Platinum,* and I would pay for your tutors while you continued to supply the *Shiny Platinum*.”

Freya’s lips puckered in distaste, “How about no tutors?” I had been paying for her special tutors since entering the academy, and it was the worst part of her day.

“Mother wouldn’t allow it if you were not getting an education before the academy,” I said seriously.

Freya mumbled, “I already make more than her.”

I sighed. I had created a monster. I shouldn’t have been paying her so well. I would have to think of a way to cut her off without getting her upset with me. “Well, think about it. You are to spend the day with Wynna and Ennet, and I don’t want to hear anything about you wandering off alone. If I do, then I will never take you to the city again,” I warned her.

The skyship landed, and I made my way down the ramp. Tatem, my artist, had started painting the side of the building. The massive hydra was already sketched out, encompassing half of the side of the building. A large number of departing passengers stopped and looked at it before going into the restaurant to check it out. The restaurant was not open for business until noon, but they could still see the panels inside and wander over to the bakery. The hydra was a great advertising platform.

I started to rethink my position of not making miniatures. The shelves I requested had been installed to display miniatures of the beasts in the panels. I was going to see if I could find a metal sculpture to create them, not wanting to waste my own time and aether creating the bronze and shaping them. Maybe I would make a few…

I took the stairs up to the apartments to look for Gimble. Lana was in the hallway and directed me to the training room. In the training room, Gimble and Sammie were engaged while Talia and an older man looked on. I walked over to stand next to the older man and asked, while watching Sammie get some instruction, “Ullmark?”

“Yes. All you, the young pupil of the mysterious Callem Dregella?” He asked while appraising me and still watching Sammie.

I did the same to him. He had salt and pepper hair and a well-trimmed beard. Ullmark wore clean heavy canvas adventuring clothes worn where the straps for leather armor would have rubbed. He carried just a long sword on his belt.

“Callem is my mentor or at least one of them,” I answered. “His true protegee is Gareth, who I am sure is either apologizing to a young woman or wooing a new one,” I said, offering a smile.

Ullmark smiled back, and we shook wrists. “I am willing to join your dungeon squad,” he shook his head in disbelief. “I never thought I would tie myself again to a team.”

I thought quickly, “You can leave at any time, Ullmark.”

“Ahem, yeah, I have already selected a room below,” he grinned and chuckled. “I admit the apartment put it over the talk and free food below? You are going to end up with overweight delvers, Storme.”

We talked briefly about the details of his contract. It was the same as everyone else. Gimble approached, and the team for the dungeon entrance was Talia, Sammie, Ullmark, Gimble, Storme, and Gareth. We didn’t require two scouts for the run, so Aelyn was out. We were going to meet up in six hours to travel over to the dungeon.

I went and checked on Mera in the brewery. My new alchemist, Lachlan, had set up in the corner of the room but was not present. Mera and Fera were working together to start a batch of beer. I told Mera about the special yeast that Broderick had mentioned and promised to get her some to culture. I sampled her first few attempts that had been filtered, and it was good, not great, but good.

Remy found me and was excited to go over the numbers. The delve last seventh day had lost 22 gold and 3 silver. The restaurant and bakery had made a 3gold and 88 silver profit in the first week! This past week was already 6 gold positive and didn’t include today’s service. I was a bit shocked as it looked like even with our high staffing expenses and food costs, we were going to bring in 7 to 8 gold a week. It may just be from the novelty of the restaurant, though. Remy said our cooks were already being heavily recruited to gain our secrets.

That was funny because we didn’t have any real secrets other than my enchanting work for the griddles and oil wells. I told Remy that he could tell the manager that he could add staff as needed. I also asked Remy to get me a large supply of bronze and gave him two large coins to acquire it.

I spent the remainder of the lull before the delve to work on the plumbing and kitchens on the second floor. Gareth found me 30 minutes before we were scheduled to leave, “Come on, Stormy! Gimble said we would try the first-floor boss today!” At least Gareth didn’t seem moody anymore. I went to my room and changed, and met the group.

As we walked the street, Sammie asked me if I planned to put on warmer clothes. There was a chill in the air, but I had my *thermostatic aura* spell activated, and the air around me was at 20 C. We arrived a few minutes early, and Ullmark went and talked to the guards while we waited. Just before we entered, Ullmark approached me and said, concerned, “Someone has been buying up the token for the shift before us. My friends,” he indicated to the guards, “said it was a new team from the capital island. They are experienced by their demeanor.”

He paused before offering advice, “If you do decide to take down the boss today, I don’t think it is a good idea to go to the second floor. The second floor is a general maze; all teams get randomly assigned locations. If the new team is targeting us, then we should get more info before encountering them.”

I hadn’t really considered someone would want to kill us in a dungeon so soon. I slipped Ullmark two gold, “For your friends and let them know we appreciate any information they have in the future.”

The hourglass expired, and we were allowed to enter. As we moved through the trees, killing bees, Gareth made his best attempts to impress Talia. Ullmark had placed himself in the center of the front line and, as Aelyn had mentioned, was being protective of Sammie from both the bees and Gareth. When we stopped for a rest, I mentioned it to Ullmark privately.

“You seem focused on keeping Sammie safe. Is there a reason?” I asked quietly.

He looked at me for a bit before admitting, “She reminds me of my daughter. Not the looks…my daughter had black hair and brown eyes…but she has the same naivete to the world.”

I asked another question, “Where is your daughter now?”

He sighed heavily, “She passed away five years ago. Oh, not like that, she was 97. When she went to the academy at 14, I was drinking, and my wife kicked me out. I didn’t support them and never contacted her again. I did go to her funeral. Later in life, I regretted my decision. Working for the Bricio’s makes a man mean…I didn’t realize it until too late.” He looked at Sammie, “She is kind of my second chance. That is why I give advice to the younger delvers at the guild, imparting wisdom I never gave to my own daughter.”

“How old are you?” I inquired of the man who appeared younger than Callem.

“I don’t really remember. Had some decades, I didn’t really track things. I came to Skyholme about 150 years ago. Before that…I was maybe 50. So I will go with 200,” he smiled at my astonishment. “Yeah, I told Callem my only ability is tier 2, and it slows my aging. I have seen and done a lot in my life.”

Gimble called for the rest to be over, and we all started on the bees again. We were moving through the woods to the goblin camp. We had been at it for about 5 hours when the woods suddenly ended in a large snow-covered clearing. A short eight-foot wooden palisade of upright logs circled the frost goblin village.

Ullmark talked to every, “Ok, we want to draw the goblins away from the walls and eliminate them first. Then we knock down the wall on the far side and draw the goblins out in two and three. The hobgoblin chief in the round structure in the center of the village. He will have four guards with him and one shaman. The shaman is the one with the bee wing cape. It is really pretty but fragile. It sells for about 5 gold if you can avoid damaging it, but for our first attempt just hammer the shaman first. He can heal the others.”

He took a breath, “If it goes to shit, cover each to the breach in the wall, and we can hold there. The hobgoblin will not pursue us to the outer walls, so we just have to deal with the four guards and shaman.”

Gareth was bouncing anxiously. I assumed he had read about this floor boss a hundred times and had a mental picture of exactly what he would do. We made our way to the wall and drew the goblin patrols to us. They had no ranged weapons and never came in groups larger than three.

When the patrols were cleared, we created the breach. The three front liners of Sammie, Ullmark, and Gareth did all the work as the goblin corpses piled up. Ullmark went into the fortified town a few times to get the attention of groups. Gimble was keeping track of the time, and Talia and I watched the open area around us. Finally, Ullmark said we could enter the town.

The smell reminded me of rotting eggs and urine. We only faced single goblins as we circled to the center of the town. Gimble said we only had an hour left before our eight-hour clock expired. This meant we would have to defeat the hobgoblin and then exit on the second floor of the dungeon. The round hut was prominent in the center, the only two-story rough wooden structure. Ullmark spoke, “When we get close, they will all rush out at once. Talia focus on the shaman with ranged spells. I will keep the hobgoblin busy, and everyone else will take down the guards as quickly as possible. Then join me in attacking the chief. He is a lot tougher than he looks, and don’t think just because he slows down, he isn’t dangerous.”

A stray goblin came streaming out of a small hut, and Sammie cut it down. We then approached the central structure. A loud scream echoed from inside. It was a challenging scream. A six-foot, well-muscled goblin charged out and ran at us. His bodyguards followed, but I did not see the shaman. I summoned my two-handed falchion, dropping my staff. Taking limbs would bring this encounter to an end quicker.

I moved far off to the right and engaged the further bodyguard. He was dressed in heavy furs that protected his entire body except for his hands and head. His misaligned yellow teeth grinned as he sought me with a black steel short sword. I easily parried his attack downward, spun, and brought my falchion to his ear. I was surprised when my blade took off the top half of his head.

Sammie was next to me, and she was evenly matched with the next bodyguard. I flanked him, allowing Sammie to embed her axe in his chest, and then I repeated my beheading attack, this time striking the next and getting the entire pumpkin this time. I smiled at Sammie only to be thrown violently back. The shaman had appeared, and a basketball-sized ball of ice had slammed into me. I coughed blood, and a quick check told me my ribs were broken. So much for my leather armor. I stumbled to my feet while casting lesser restoration instant healing to get my ribs back in place.

Looking around, I could see Talia firing streaks of fire at the shaman, who was protected by a magical shield. Sammie had checked on me before going to help Ullmark, who was bleeding and at a standstill with the hobgoblin. Gimble was kneeling over Gareth, who was dazed and having trouble standing. A large ball of ice told me what had happened. Gareth had been struck in the back of the head with it. Probably when he maneuvered behind it to kill it.

I needed to decide on the bigger threat, the shaman on the hobgoblin. Talia couldn’t break the shaman’s defenses, so I cranked up my *lightning reflexes* spell and charged. The hobgoblin tried to interpose himself, but I blocked him with an aether shield, not that he was fast enough to catch me anyway.

The shaman panicked and moved its shield toward me, allowing Talia’s magic to strike him and stagger him. I went into a slide on the snow of took him out at the knees. Both legs fell as his upper body collapsed, and he screamed in pain and disbelief. With his focus on his pain, I quickly removed his head.

The hobgoblin had disengaged and was trying to get me before I reached his shaman. He came at me with a visage of furious rage. Both Sammie and Ullmark were on his heels. I was still juiced from my lightning spell and wasn’t worried about the hobgoblin’s speed. As he reached me in his charge, he tripped on my invisible aether shield, falling face first and exposing the back of his head. I had already started the arc of my blade, and it sunk into the back of his neck. I was surprised I hadn’t severed his head. The hobgoblin twitched, still not dead but his spinal column severed, making his body useless.

I scanned the area and, with no other threats, moved to Gareth and Gimble and deactivated my spells. I immediately assessed Gareth’s condition. Severe concussion and some vertebrae damaged. Twenty seconds of healing magic, and he was standing and shaking his head.

“It’s over?” He asked, confused. Gimble started talking to him to explain things, and he swore. “I was trying to keep an eye on everyone else while dispatching my opponent. The shaman must have arrived late, and I had my back to him.”

Gimble said, “Gareth, you learn from mistakes. Focus on your sphere of combat, and you can’t control everything around you.” Gareth looked embarrassed.

“I should have been wearing a helm. I have one, but the bees and goblins had been so easy I didn’t think I needed it. How did everyone else fare?” He looked at the group circling him.

I moved and healed Ullmark, who had two minor cuts. Sammie had a sprained wrist and laceration on her thigh, which I also healed. Ullmark said, “It went well. Storme took care of the hobgoblin, shaman, and two guards. The shaman used to have only energy bolts, shields, and ranged healing for attack and defense. This ice ball is new. We should report it to the guild, as there might be a reward if we are the first to do so.” Gareth looked at me like he didn’t know me. He started to ask how I managed to kill almost every enemy myself, but I waived him off.

“Shouldn’t there be a treasure chest around here somewhere?” I said, doing a circle. I didn’t want Gareth to know about my *lightning reflexes* spell until I could surprise him with it in a duel.

Ullmark said, “It is in the chief’s hut as well as the arch to the maze on the next level. We all went inside, and the smell wasn’t terrible. As Ullmark said, an arch similar to the one we used to get into the dungeon dominated the space. A small chest was on a table. I examined the runes. There were 12 delvers already in the maze. Gareth was opening the chest, and for some reason, I had wanted to yell, ‘check for traps,’ but held my tongue.

Gareth spoke, “Three gold, three silver. It looks like the boots and a spell book.” Talia was moving to the chest.

Talia gasped, “It is not the surgical harvest spell. It is called the *ice ball*. She was paging threw it. It is a tier 1 water spell. I am not familiar with it.”

Gimble said, “I am guessing the dungeon evolved the shaman, and we were the first to defeat it. That is why the spell was within the reward chest.” Gareth was nodding emphatically at the explanation while putting on his new white boots. Since he opened the chest, they had sized to his person.

I walked to the chest, and the coins were gone as well. I would have to tell Remy to take it off his weekly pay. The boots would be deducted as well…that was another 40 gold? He wasn’t going to be happy.

I asked Talia if she was interested in the spell, and she shook her head no, but her eyes said yes. New spells were probably curiosities. I dropped it onto the shelf in my dimensional storage. Ullmark and Gimble were picking up the weapons outside and looting the goblins.

The hobgoblin had an aether crystal, as did the bodyguards and shaman. It was a bloody mess digging them out of the skulls, and I was glad I didn’t have to do it. I walked the goblin town with Sammie, and we killed two more goblins. Gimble called us to the town, saying we had just a few minutes to get back. We entered the arch as a group, on guard and ready for trouble.