Chapter 93

As we descended the hold, Callem said, “I haven’t heard from Sebastian.”  Concern laced his voice.

I hesitated to ask, “And you want to go to the capital to find him?”

“It had crossed my mind. When you get to my age, you don’t have many friends.  You try to keep the few you do,” he said gravely.

The hold was lit with poor aether lights, and Bleiz played with a knife while guarding the wide-eyed prisoners.  Aelyn looked around.  The ten men tasked with taking my sister and I were bound and gagged.  Most looked afraid, but the two that didn’t, Callem pointed to without hesitation, “Those two.”

It wasn’t long before the two were in chairs, with Callem standing in front of them.  I really didn’t want to see Callem in action again.  Callem picked one of the men and asked, “What did the Bricios want with Storme Hardlight and his sister?”

The man looked reluctant to answer.  Callem took out a stiletto.  He placed the tip on the man’s kneecap and repeated his question.  Aelyn stepped forward, “They were taking him to Halifax Bricio to be killed.”  Aelyn’s announcement had the man’s eyes go wide with fear realizing the woman had just read his mind.

It seemed too simple.  He just wanted to kill me?  I had started the chain reaction by winning his mithril shirt from his son in the duel, but to just kill me out of spite?  Aelyn wasn’t done, though.  “They were planning to kill Freya in front of you first.”  I spun and looked at Aelyn, who looked sick, and her face confirmed to me that she was speaking the truth.

My anger was clouding my vision again, and my pumping blood muted my hearing.  I wanted to go immediately to the capital and end Halifax and his sons.  Callem was continuing his questioning, “What are the Bricio plans?”

During the questioning, something triggered, and Aelyn immediately moved in front of the man Callem was questioning. Aelyn asked, “Tell us about the Wolfguard!”  Callem moved and let Aelyn take his place.  Bleiz moved forward, interested as well.

The man said nothing, but Aelyn’s face twisted in disgust and horror.  It was a few minutes of questions he didn’t answer.  But soon Aelyn stood and addressed us, “The Bricios have been making their own Wolfguard.  I don’t know for how long, but this,” Aelyn’s voice laced with disgust as she pointed at the leader, “animal.  Participated.”

The man laughed, “Close, but not that it matters. The Bricios are not breeding our own Wolfguard.  They are just taking the cast-offs.  The Riffolk were to toss the culled stock that didn’t make the cut off the island.”  Bleiz flashed forward and had his blade under the man’s chin.  He spoke carefully, “Instead, we took the promising ones to the Bricio caves on Metallica Island.  When the Bricios lost control of their dungeon, they no longer had the resources to feed them.  It forced Otieno’s hand.  He had to use them or lose them.”  He took a deep breath, “He chose to use them.  Teams of Wolfguard are stalking all those in succession for the Torrent and Miaden families.  There will be only one family in a few days.”

Callem tensed. He looked conflicted. I knew he had planned to go and search for Sebastian. He finally looked at me and then at Gareth. “I will have Wynna charter a skyship to the lowlands for everyone.” He inhaled, “I don’t know why I can’t let this go. My loyalty to Skyholme feels like a lost dream. But I can’t sit by. I can’t ask you to come as this is beyond dangerous.”

I didn’t hesitate, “Callem, I am going. But I only want vengeance against Halifax and his sons. After that….Skyholme can be left to its fate.” I think knowing Callem was going had emboldened me.

I tried convincing Gareth to go to the lowlands with Freya and everyone else. His response was a rant, “Dragon shit, Storme!  If you are going to do something ridiculously foolish, don’t think you are leaving me behind,” he crossed his arms in defiance.  Aelyn had the same look on her face.  Bleiz looked amused at my friends.

The preparations were quick. I emptied my storage of dozens of crafted weapons and all my coins for my family to sell in the lowlands. I still hoped to join them eventually, but they should be well off if I couldn’t. I didn’t say goodbye to my parents or Freya. I couldn’t in case they managed to convince me otherwise.

The plan with to go to the Bricio estate, also known as the Black Spire. It was the tower of the high wizard Kurota, the man who had split the island and destroyed his race. This was where the Riffolk had been planning to bring me to kneel and be punished before Halifax Bricio.

We questioned the prisoners again and knew that Halifax and his sons only had three Wolfguard between them after Otieno had purged their servants. The hiccup was that Abaddon supposedly had his Navy Harbinger warship docked there with his loyal crew.

As the ship made its way to the capital island, I was standing next to Callem, steering the ship.  Callem was my navigator.  He knew enough about navigating the islands to give me feedback.  The angle of approach, elevation, and landmarks in the capital in order to get us to the Bricio estate, where the Black Spire was located.  As the skyship left the edge of Titan’s Shield and moved in open air toward Skyholme, Callem offered, “We should dispose of the Riffolk in the hold.”

I replied, “They are tied up mostly naked in the hold and can’t do anything.” We were also wearing their clothes and armor as a disguise.

“If you don’t have the stomach, I can handle it.  I will knock them out and toss them overboard.  The fall to the lowlands will kill them,” Callem said.

“It wouldn’t be the fall that killed them but the ground stopping them,” I said as a bad joke.  I didn’t want to murder people.  My joke got a small grin on the serious Callem. Bleiz came and stood near us.

“Storme, let me do it.” He had the coldest and most menacing visage I had ever seen on him. “You know I grew up in an education pack. There were forty-three of us to start. The ones that failed were taken away one at a time.” He pointed and was suddenly growling out his words, “They took my kin and tossed them off the island. It is only fitting they should meet the same fate. Allow me this, and I will never again ask another thing of you.”

Callem had stepped back to let me make my decision. I looked into Bleiz’s eyes, and they showed that he wanted vengeance. That was why I was going to confront Halifax, my own vengeance. I spoke with clarity, “Bleiz, don’t ever be afraid to ask me anything. As for this request.” I took a deep breath, “Do it.” And with those words, I had committed the murder of ten men.

Beliz took much pleasure in the act—lining them up on deck. Pronouncing summary judgment on each and then throwing them over the railing one by one. When I didn’t see fear in the eyes of one of the men, I paused the executions, “Wait!” It was one of the leaders Callem had questioned.

He was in boxers and had a ring and one oversized earring. I walked forward and removed both pieces of jewelry, which transferred his face to utter fear. I turned over the ring—nonmagical, just a mix of gold and platinum. The earring was a runic device, and I examined the metallic runs—some type of light fall or feather fall device. The man started struggling, but he was gagged.

“You can proceed, Bleiz,” I said coldly. I moved the jewelry to my dimensional storage.

Bleiz nodded at me and then unceremoniously threw the struggling man overboard. Both Gareth and Callem had watched the event. The trip on the *Stuffed Goose* took over two hours to approach the capital island. Gareth approached me on seeing it and said, “You should have asked the delve team to join us. Now that we are here, I don’t feel as confident.”

I just shook my head. I had tried to convince both Gareth and Aelyn not to come. I let them make up their own minds in the end, and I think by letting Aelyn join us, I had repaired some of the damage to our relationship. Of course, we both were likely to die. Callem had given her half of his invisibility potions, so she had three. Gareth and I each had one remaining.

I focused forward as the island appeared underneath us. It was eerily quiet. The normal sky traffic was gone. Only one large black ship orbited the Citadel in the distance. Bleiz said, “The *Absolution* will defend the Citadel from all skyships. Keep us a good distance away from it.”

Callem was on my right and pointed, “There to the left of the city. That black line in the distance. That is the spire. It is about three miles outside the city.” I veered the ship and aimed for the spire. My heart was racing. Within the city, I could see small puffs of smoke rising and very infrequent flashes of light. They were fighting, and I wondered if it was the illicit Wolfguard hunting the unfortunate members of the families who couldn’t find sanctuary in the Citadel.

The Black Spire got more and more impressive as we approached. It must have reached 400 hundred feet into the air and seemed impossibly thin. They even had their own sky docks. Two large traders and a Harbinger warship occupied them. On the deck of the Harbinger, a number of men milled about. A bell toned for our arrival. It was not a call to arms.

I came up with a stupid plan. “Hey, everyone. Find something to grab onto. When I pass over the *Phobos,* I am going to cut the aether powering the anti-gravity drives.” Callum’s eyes went wide before he grinned, liking the plan. Gareth and Aelyn’s eyes were wide in fear as they looked for someplace to secure themselves. Bleiz had long since gone invisible, so I did not know his reaction to my bold pronouncement. I added, “Don’t worry, I will create some aether shields for us to stand on; we are not going down with the ship.”

I could see the Navy crew below me waving me off and heard them swearing as I was going to pass 100 feet over them. I was probably breaking some aviation laws or something. I created the aether discs, and we all gathered on them. I then cut the safeguards off and then the aether to the *Stuffed Goose*. It hung for just a second before falling away from beneath us. It was just a third the size of the Phobos, but it was still heavy enough to crash threw the upper decks and into the decks below.

I tried to make light of the situation, “Damn, I still need to work on my landings.” I said while descending the aether discs to the ground and the chaos below. I was sharing a disc with the invisible Bleiz and felt him leave when we got 15 feet from the ground. The Black Spire was two hundred yards away, and soldiers were slowly coming out to answer to attack.

I had hoped Abaddon had been below decks and had been killed, but enough of the Naval soldiers were gaining their senses that I needed to focus. Callum was already ending dazed men with grim efficiency. Gareth had seemed reluctant to join him, killing wounded and dazed men but eventually swung his blade to remove the head of a partially trapped man. That broke his damn of reluctance. We couldn’t leave the soldiers alive behind us. And these soldiers were traitors to Skyholme, supporting the coup.

I used my *lightning spear* to distract one of the two men Gareth was engaged with. He didn’t need my help, but I couldn’t yet cross the line to kill someone. A few minutes later, Callem came up from the lower shattered decks. He had a grim expression and flicked the blade to get the blood off. He saw me, “Take the potions, and we will approach the tower from the right.” Aleyn appeared next to me and held up her arm for me to heal. She had a deep slash, the only one of us injured. I healed her, and she drank her invisibility potion without saying a word.

I turned, and maybe twenty men were grouped together and moving as a unit toward us. Gareth was already drinking. I told myself I needed to get my shit together. I pulled my falchion and then drank the potion. The Bricio estate soldiers were moving cautiously toward the wrecks. I scrambled down the side and listened for the others. Bleiz whispered to me from my right, “I will be moving on right and have your back.”

I noticed some grass pressed to my right. I wondered where Aelyn, Gareth, and Callem were. As the house guards passed us, I breathed a sigh of relief. If they spent time on the wrecks, we would have less to deal with inside. We had been lucky so far—no ranged weapons or magic.

When we got within fifty yards of the tall spire, I suddenly saw Callem’s outline. They had some defense to disrupt or dispel magic. Callem suddenly rolled forward, and a heavy crossbow thudded into the ground. Callem grunted loudly, “Get inside the door as fast as you can.”

I added an angled aether shield toward the tower. Gareth appeared next and dodged a bolt himself. I was slightly shocked Aelyan appeared to my left, and I added an aether shield to protect her. My shield thudded twice, deflecting bolts, as I reached the smooth wall. Callem and Gareth were already there. I didn’t see Bleiz. “Bleiz?” I asked the air.

“Here,” came a whisper. I didn’t see him. His invisibility necklace hadn’t been canceled. It must have been a much stronger enchantment than the potions. The rest of us were completely visible now. I leaned against the wall with a slight balcony over us and looked back toward the skyship docks. The soldiers had already noticed us, and maybe a dozen were rushing back.

Callem ordered, “Gareth, take these and hold the door. The rest of us are going inside.” Callem handed Gareth two potions and disappeared inside the door. I followed a second later, trusting Callem’s decision.

The entire first floor was an open chamber with a 100’ ceiling. Two wrap-around staircases were heading up along the walls. The chamber was about 90’ to the other side. Callem was moving to the stairs on the right and talking, “The second level is the offices. The third and higher are residences. If they are here, they will be turtling up there.”

I followed Callem, and there was a sudden clash of steel. Bleiz and another Wolfguard appeared, and they were engaged in violent combat. Callem hadn’t noticed the invisible enemy and took a breath to assist. I also moved to assist, but Callem had already dispatched the surprised Wolfguard. Bleiz was bleeding from two deep wounds, so I moved to heal him. Bleiz also had a minor poison effect I quickly removed from him.

Callem swore looking at the dead Wolfguard, “That is one of Otieno’s personal guards. He must be here as well.”

My eyes went wide. If Otieno was here, we could expect more than three Wolfguard. Usually, a Triumvirate seat had a dozen or more Wolfguard with them when they left the Citadel for public appearances. “What do we do?” I asked Callem.

Callem looked at the stairs, “We kill Otieno and break the Bricios.” He paused, “Storme, I can handle this by myself. You should leave.”

It took me a moment to decide. “No, let’s go,” I said, moving past Callem. Bleiz, now healed, paused momentarily on the corpse to remove a heavy belt. He handed it to me when he caught up to me. It had similar enchantments to the necklace I had given Bleiz but required aether to be channeled from the wearer instead of relying on aether stones. I put on the belt and rushed to catch up with Callem. I heard Gareth yell from the doorway at me as he got ready to handle the returning soldiers, “Stormy, don’t lose!”

I sent my senses into the belt as I climbed the stairs. It was a complete stealth belt, silence, scent, and sound. The problem was it only worked when you were stationary. If you moved at all, the effect was broken. It was more useful for spying than attacking.

Combat up ahead had me rushing. At the top of the stairs, I found a second dead Wolfguard and two regular guards. Then another beheaded Wolfguard. Callem was possessed in his determination. He was seeking vengeance for all of Skyholme, for everything that had been done to Callem. He was unleashing years of anger.

I followed the path of destruction through the second level. A few soldiers with crossbows were mixed in the carnage on the floor. This was too easy. Callem was doing all the work. We finally caught up to Callem, and he didn’t look so great. He had one bolt embedded in his shoulder and multiple bleeding cuts. He was at the stairs going up to the residential level. Two guards were engaged with him completely on the defensive.

Callem crossed the two blades I had made for him in front of him, and I was curious for only a second. A massive blue-flamed fireball hit the crossed blades, throwing Callem back and down the stairs and into the wall. The two human guards took a lot of the blast and burned corpses. I had an aether shield in front of me, but still, the concussive blast knocked me twenty feet down the corridor. Aelyn did not have one of my aether shields and was blown into a doorway and struggled to stand before collapsing into unconsciousness. I tried to move but needed some healing. Two Wolfguard started rushing down the stairs toward Callem, who wasn’t moving.

I healed myself quickly and was stumbling forward to defend Callem. I wasn’t going to get there in time. I had failed Callem. I did look away, and relief flooded me as Bleiz appeared between the Wolfguard and Callem and engaged them. I could get Aelyn up quickly or spend time healing Callem. Bleiz was struggling with the two Wolfguard as well. I needed to decide whether to heal Aelyn or Callem first….