Chapter 150

The captain of the Harbinger stood before me with the news that was a shock.  “Where is the pirate fleet?”  I asked him while playing various scenarios in my mind.

The captain bowed respectively, “High Mage, I was told to bring you to Slyhold to join the meeting with the Admirals.”

I nodded and joined him on board the Harbinger; Bleiz unsurprisingly appeared on my left, but the captain jumped to Bleiz’s satisfaction.  We took off and landed at the active Navy docks in Skyhold Citadel.  Ships were being cycled into the sky to keep a screen over the island.  A familiar captain met us at the dock and led us rapidly to the meeting room.

Sebastian and two other Skyholme admirals were in the room in dress uniforms.  Sebastian looked up from a massive table map of the lowlands.  “Storme, thank you for coming so quickly.  We got a message from the Adventurer’s Guild about the location of the Black Maurader fleet.”

I moved to the table, and one of the admirals made way for me to stand next to Sebastian.  He pointed to the map, “There is a volcano caldera here.  It is filled with water, making a lake.  A ship flew over and was chased by a dozen pirate ships emerging from the volcano.”

“Just a dozen?”  I asked, tracing the line from Skyholme to the caldera.  There was a ruler lying across the map, and it was 1500 miles from the islands in their current orbit.

Sebastian finished, “The Guild dispatched a scout to confirm.  There were sixty-one ships inside the old volcano.” I looked up sharply.  Sebastian nodded, “Almost all ships were flying flags of the Black Mauraders.”  My heart raced as it was suddenly starting to feel more real. They were really going to attack Skyholme.

“How long?”  I asked Sebastian with a heavy note.

“We estimate they can reach Skyholme as a group in fifteen hours.  We have hired an Adventurer skyship to spy on the caldera and alert us when they launch.  The problem,” Sebastian sighed heavily, “Not all the ships were Black Mauraders.  Two were Harbingers from Skyholme, and other mercenary ships were also present in the caldera.  Also, we have almost fifty unaccounted-for Black Maurader ships, including the flagship for the Sky King, the leader of the Black Mauraders.”

One of the other admirals stepped forward, “High Mage, we believe they have split their fleet in two to create a two-pronged attack.  If the other fleet matches the first, we could face one hundred and twenty ships.”

Sebastian confirmed, “We are going to be outnumbered two to one.”

Loriel and the other two members of the Triumvirate arrived in a whirlwind of staff.  Callem and captains from the Sadians arrived shortly after.  A debriefing started, and I stepped back against the wall as they discussed the prospects of defending against the attack.  The table map was switched to show the large islands and review the deployment of skyships.

The Sadian captains being here gave them an insight into our capabilities.  They had a strong interest in helping us defend the islands.  Their interest was not only in the recent opening of trade but also in preventing the pirates from taking the islands and establishing a base.  If the Black Mauraders took control of the Skyholme islands, they would mercilessly raid the lowlands.

Some arguments broke out about the best deployment of various assets to defend against a two-pronged attack.  I was not planning to be part of the skyship defense.  The Sky Wraith had a job to protect the children of the Citadel, and the Maelstrom would remain invisible and only reveal itself when the Mauraders attacked the Spire.  No one asked me what my role would be in the conflict.  As far as the Triumvirate was concerned, my contribution was keeping the skyship’s runes in perfect order.

The whole point of the meeting seemed to reinforce the inevitable attack. It was only days away, and we would have half a day warning. When the debrief and strategy meeting was getting close to ending, Callem moved to stand next to me.  As Sebastian moved miniature skyships on the map to show attack patterns, he whispered, “Storme, I would appreciate it if Wynna and Ennet could take refuge in the Spire.”

“Certainly Callem.  Can you ask them to try and convince my mother as well?”  I replied in a whisper.

Callem nodded and moved back to his position at the table. When the meeting ended, a young guard captain approached me and said, “High Mage, I am Junior Captain Liam Cloudhunter, top of my class in my third year at the Navy Academy. I have been assigned to be your liaison with your rescue ship at the Spire. I have a counterpart in the Citadel who will use a communication stone to let me know when to bring your rescue ship to the Citadel.”

The captain looked younger than me. “We can board you with the Wolfsguard at the Spire. You can remain close to my skyship captain, Pakkam.” I left with the young captain in tow. I assumed he was tied to either Callum or Loriel, but I was happy for the help. A Harbinger dropped us back off at the Spire.

I assembled everyone together, which included all the Wolfsguard, Shiny Platinum Delvers, Duskhunters, and all the staff Isla had assembled at the Spire. I addressed the large group, “This is Captain Liam. He is going to serve as a liaison in getting our charges from the Citadel here in the event of an attack. When we receive that warning, and the Sky Wraith launches to retrieve them at the Citadel, I want everyone to get inside the Spire. No exceptions. The walls are indestructible, and our strongest defenders will be there.” I nodded toward the Duskhunters.

I spent the next hour relaying the information I learned at the meeting and answering questions. Isla had the most questions, and after the assembly had broken up, I walked with her. “Can you handle this?” I asked her.

She didn’t answer and instead asked, “Where are you going to be during the attack? From the way you were talking, you are not staying in the Spire.”

I considered for a long moment, “No, probably not. I will probably plan to be in Aegis City to make sure my parents are okay during the attack,” I revealed my plans.

“Do you want me to get the stone mage to reinforce the Shiny Platinum further?” Isla said seriously.

“Can he? I thought he already reinforced it so a skyship could land on the roof,” I asked as we walked in the gardens.

“There is always more they can do. He actually was prepaid for work on the Wolfsguard Village, and with Duskhunter mages doing much of the work, he should be open to doing additional work on the Shiny Platinum,” Isla informed me.

“Will he want more gold?” I inquired. I had been focusing on enchanting and had not been making any coins.

Iris bit her lip, “I will talk with him. I think we should get him to do the work without having to pay him. If he protests, I will remind him you healed his grandson for free.”

“Any problem getting enough supplies for a protracted siege?” I asked, knowing she had been stockpiling the basement in the Spire.

“I am waiting on deliveries. A lot of supplies are going through the Shiny Platinum, so it is just a matter of transferring them from the warehouse there to here. The only thing I have not had time to do was purchase the last two warehouses in Solaris City. Remy was going to take care of it, but he has been trying to manage both Shiny Platinums and track all the dungeon harvest from the Duskhunters and our delvers,” she said.

I had hoped both Isla and Remy would finally have a break. “I will take care of the warehouses. It should only take a few hours, and I think Mera and Fera will want to see their family in Hen’s Hollow.” Isla produced the bag of platinum I had given her. I deposited in my dimensional space. “You are doing good work, and I hope you find it rewarding, Isla.” I could tell Isla wanted to say something else, but nodded and walked away.

The next day Cilia and Leda were working with the Wolfsguard on the Sky Wraith. They were helping Pakkam train the crew. Isla was busy getting the Spire ready to host so many extra people. I took the Maelstrom with Mera, Fera, Bleiz and the cats to Solaris City.

Mera was playing with Adrial when she said, “You know, Storme, the cats are twin sisters, just like Fera and me. I hope one day to have twin daughters, too.”

Mera was putting me on the spot. “I hope you one day fulfill that dream, Mera. I will set down in Hen’s Hollow, so you two do not have to walk too far to see your parents.” Mera pursed her lips but didn’t say anything.

We zipped to Hen’s Hollow and landed on the raised platform overlooking the Academy barracks. It felt so long ago that this monument loomed so large to me.  It now seemed so insubstantile as the Maelstrom settled.

Yadam, one of the guards at Hen’s Hollow, met us as we descended the ramp. He recognized me and did not ask for the fee for landing. Instead, he welcomed the High Mage back to Hen’s Hollow. Mera and Fera took off to their family farm, lugging gifts for their parents and siblings.

Bleiz was at my side watching them and noted, “Sometimes I do not understand you, Storme.”

“Stay on the ship with the cats. I will not be long. I am just going to purchase the warehouses, stop at a clinic or two to do some healing, and will be back,” I told Bleiz, who frowned.

“You took me along to babysit?” He said, and Kiara hissed at being called a baby. At least, that is what it seemed like to me.

“I am sure you can manage the blow to your ego,” I patted him on the shoulder. Kiara’s tail twitched irritatedly as I walked away.

The short walk to the city brought back memories. I could not believe it had been less than a year since I had finished my First Year Academy. Walking through the gates, I turned toward the skyship docks. I realized I did not know which warehouses I was going to purchase. There were only a dozen warehouses near the docks.

I walked the docks and talked to two city guards, and they directed me to the offices dealing with property transfer. I actually did not know the process and regretted not bringing Iris or Remy to expedite the process. I entered the office, and a middle-aged man was behind the desk. I produced the contracts that had the buyout clause for the two remaining warehouses.

“Can you help me? I am here to complete these two contracts.” I slid the contracts to the plain-looking man, who took them with a sigh.

He examined them as I waited. He finally looked up, “You will need a representative from the owner here to sign off in front of me. Then I can complete the title transfer.”

“Can you summon them here?” I asked, and I slid him a gold coin before he could object.

The man yelled, “Henkel!! Run to Cloud Storage and get them to send a rep. Don’t take no for an answer. Tell them…tell them one of their warehouses has collapsed.” A young boy zipped out of the offices, and the man pocketed the gold coin, nodding to me.

It was only twenty minutes before an irate man entered the office, “What the wind devil are you going on about, Dannie? All my warehouses are still standing!” The man entered the office and walked straight past me.

The clerk, whose name was Dannie, slid the contracts to the angry man. He paused and looked at them, then abruptly looked around the room and focused on me. “You represent the High Mage?”

“In a manner of speaking,” I gestured. “I am just here to pay the buyout and then get the title to the warehouses.” I had no love for this man who called in the contract when he learned how profitable it could be with open trade.

The man narrowed his eyes. I could tell he did not want to honor the contract. I materialized the bag of platinum and dropped it on the desk. Greed appeared in his eyes at the bag torn between the warehouse’s potential future earnings. He reluctantly opened the bag and slowly counted the coins.

As he counted, Donnie mentioned, “You should have Gerald here give a tour of the warehouses. He has been known to slip some things by in the past.”

“Donnie, we do not need your input. I can handle things just fine on my own,” the man from Cloud Storage muttered.

I really did not want this to get complicated. I nodded to Donnie, “Thanks, a quick tour sounds advisable. Let us finish the paperwork first.” The next hour was a painful reminder of bureaucracy at work. I had to pay another five gold to complete the paperwork and waited while documents were created, stamped, and signed.

Gerald, who I learned owned the Cloud Storage company, was going to be down to just a single warehouse after I purchased these two from him. He would be very wealthy, but he was the type of person who constantly wanted more. With the paperwork signed and the titles added to my dimensional storage, I followed Gerald to the warehouses. At least I would be able to learn where they were.

It was a short walk, and I could tell Gerald was sweating a bit as we reached the first warehouse. We walked through the building, and it was empty, as expected. There were a dozen stalls inside the building to segregate the space. The second warehouse had guards outside of it, which sounded alarms in my head. We walked to the guards, and Gerald told them, “You all can take a break. The owner is here.” The guards looked at each other.

They walked away slowly, and we entered the warehouse. The warehouse was not as empty as it should have been. There were a number of crates in two of the stalls. Two guards were inside the warehouse as well. It was dark, but I recognized one of them. A red-haired bastard that I would not mind if he decided to attack me. Leon Mogensen. The boy who had mugged me in the alley and almost killed me in my youth.

I gestured to the crates, “What are these? I was under the impression that the warehouses were empty?”

Gerald played dumb, “I think they belong to the High Mage. He must have moved them here and hired the guards.” I groaned internally. Did he think I was this stupid?

I did not want to deal with whatever scam this man was running. The Duskhunters were going to take over the warehouses in a few months and send their own guards. “The High Mage did not. Have them removed immediately.” I could have checked the crates or threatened Gerald, but I did not want to escalate the issue where I would be forced to defend myself and probably kill some people.

I left Gerald and the guards dumbstruck and went to find the clinics in the city. I used the communication stone to talk with Bleiz, “I am headed to the clinics in the city. One of the warehouses was being used, but I did not press the issue.”

“Do you want me to check it out?” Bleiz asked with some excitement.

“No, not at this time. I don’t want complications. I am letting them move it out,” I replied. “I am going to the clinics now and will be back in a few hours.”

I knew there were two small clinics at either end of the city. Neither clinic was free, so my arrival was met with some resistance as the minor healer that ran the first one would lose income from my free healing. I gave him a large gold and healed his patients for the next few hours. I did not think I would need to go to the second clinic as a steady stream of patients arrived as word spread that the High Mage was in the city doing free healing. I wondered briefly if Gerald would figure out that he had been dealing with the High Mage directly.

The line was getting down to just a few people, and I was getting ready to walk back to Hen’s Hollow and take the Maelstrom back to the Spire. The city alarm started, a long whirling sound. This alarm was used when the Sadian Empire attacked the islands.

It made no sense that the alarm was going up. Unless the pirates were already attacking? But if the fleet in the caldera was still there and the two hypothesized pirate fleets were going to do a coordinated attack—what was the alarm for?

Bleiz was calling me on the stone, and I opened, “Storme! There are pirate ships over Hen’s Hollow. A lot of bloody dragon ships!”

I oriented my sight line and looked toward the skies in the direction of Hen’s Hollow. Black dots high in the sky were appearing one after another. The pirate fleet had snuck into the islands under invisibility. How were they able to get so close?

My communicator buzzed, and I checked it. It was the #4 icon, which meant it was Remy. I was fearful to answer, but I did. Remy was at the Shiny Platinum, “Storme. Pirate ships are above the city!” Damn it! We were supposed to have a warning.

“Protect my mother. I will get there as soon as I can,” I said as I started to run, going into lightning reflexes overdrive. My communication stone started to buzz with other contacts. As I ran, I answered the next call from Leda.

“What is happening?” I asked her.

“We are on the Sky Wraith above the city and headed to Skyhold Citadel to pick up the woman and children,” Leda said with a worried tone.

“Any Pirates on the Capital Island?” I asked Leda.

“Not yet. They are appearing over Titan’s Shield and Deepwell Island,” Leda said breathlessly. “Storme, the reports…there are a lot more than the expected one hundred and twenty ships.”

My heart was racing as I wished I could run faster. I could see the skyships leaving the docks of Solaris. They were most likely fleeing. Then, a massive explosion rocked the entire city. The concussive wave reached me as the origin was not far from me, and my spell was able to counteract the effect. Many others were not as lucky, being thrown to the ground. Something had exploded in the warehouse district adjacent to the docks where I had been hours ago.

Leda asked, “What was that Storme? Are you okay?”

“I am fine. Focus on what you need to do, Leda,” I yelled into the stone and ended the communication.

Injured people were all around me, and I paused to save a few critically injured women, children, and men. Just healing them enough to stabilize them. Everything was quickly falling apart. I needed to get to the Maelstrom and not waste my time saving people.

“Bleiz, bring the Maelstrom to me. I am near the southern gates healing people. Land near me,” I said into the stone.

Bleiz’s voice came back uncertain, “I am trying. I have never flown a skyship before.” Everything was falling apart too quickly. The sky’s black dots were growing, and dozens of people around me were screaming for help. How did this happen?