Chapter 152

The small dwarven ship had decent speed and maneuverability.  The low ceilings made it feel claustrophobic.  There was also a lingering scent of lemon and alcohol.  The controls were universal for a skyship, and I took a moment to get a feel for them before powering forward.  Thousands of pirates and mercenaries were about to land, and I couldn’t stop them all.

I targeted the largest ship in the group and toggled the aether cannons.  I could see the blue flashes leaving the ship, but they did not travel fast.  I turned my ship and couldn’t tell if I had hit my target.  It made sense why they had a spotter.  My attempt to fire on the pirates got my unwanted attention.  The dwarf gunship’s aether shield flashed, and the ship jerked as the aether crystal was being drained.

I had not planned on staying on board long and pushed the ship down hard toward a descending transport.  There were many to choose from, but I planned to disembark just before impact, so I chose one of two, landing in parallel.  I prepared my exchange ability for an unfortunate pirate on the other ship.  With less than a hundred yards remaining, I exchanged places.

A thundering crash occurred to my left, and I turned in amazement with the entire pirate crew on deck.  The small dwarven ship had crashed through the middeck and into the lower decks, disrupting the runes.  Dozens of pirates had been killed in a mess of crushed bodies and pained screams. The ship was starting to accelerate its descent to Aegis City as anti-gravity runs failed.  I hoped not too many Skyholme citizens were killed in the city below when it crashed.  I looked around my new ship.  The crew was a mix of humans, orcs, and a few goblins in a wide array of armor and clothing.

The man who appeared to be the captain yelled, “Shim must have been mind-controlled to crash his ship into the Creeping Shadow!  If you see anyone acting strange, restrain them!”

All eyes had been on the disaster I had created, but finally, a young-looking female orc with tight black leather armor and a multitude of tattoos yelled, “Cap, we got us a hitchhiker!”  She was already moving her cutlass in an arc toward me.  I went into overdrive mode and stepped out of her swing and to her side.  My heavy falchion stabbed into her ribs, reaching her heart. I twisted and retracted the blade. She had a surprised look on her face as blood gushed from the wound.

“The harpy’s dick got Maribelle! Get her a healing potion!” Another pirate yelled. I knew they had no hope of saving her unless one of these pirates had a powerful tier 3 or higher spell.

As the orc crumbled, I moved away from the crowd toward the bridge. I tossed a dozen flash-bag marbles across the deck. Ten of the twelve had successfully activated. The thunder and brightness had the pirates screaming in futility while holding their eyes and ears. I slashed and weaved among the group, leaving an arc of blood in my wake. I was not going for killing blows but going for as much damage as possible as I moved. I was a nightmare as I moved but overestimated my prowess as a blonde human suddenly blocked my strike. I created some distance from him.

The blonde pirate had a thin build and did not look like much, but his bloodshot eyes told me he had probably just consumed some speed enhancement potion.  He was also blocking my path to the bridge.  Other pirates were recovering from the flash-bang with healing potions as well.  I needed to get to the bridge.  I fired a lightning spear, which he dodged, but it seared the back of another pirate stumbling about.  The aether shield on the ship flashed as cannons in the city below scored hits.  We were getting close to the ground, and I did not want this ship to land.  I tried casting arcane web, but someone in the pirates had a counter spell. I gave up after two attempts.

My blonde opponent sneered, “You are decent boy, but not good enough.”   He had been trying to distract me while his captain attacked me from behind, but I had set an alarm spell to flash when the attack was coming.  The captain wielded a massive two-handed blade and had gone with a horizontal waist-level swing.  I could have jumped over it or dropped to the deck.  Instead, I exchanged places with the blonde pirate.  A scream of pain behind me told me Blondie was not having a good day.

A short breath later, and I was also racing toward the bridge, my falchion sent to my dimensional space. I sprinted up a short stair and burst into the room.

The bridge was on the aft deck with a large viewing window forward.  Only a pilot and navigator were here as the pirates were ready to land.  They had seen my rapid approach, and one greeted me with throwing knives and the other arcane missiles.  My aether shield had been destroyed and not reset yet, so I dodged to the right in the small room.  A dozen more flash-bang marbles were thrown from my dimensional space toward my foes.  The small room erupted in sound and light, the sound waves shattering the forward viewport.  Neither pirate had defenses against my attack.  Their eardrums burst, and they would both be permanently blinded until they received healing.

I rushed the pilot who had been casting the arcane missiles and hip-checked him out of the seat, sending him sprawling and feebly pawing at the narrow stiletto I had deposited under his chin.

The controls were not quite familiar, but I sent my metal senses into the control panels to figure out how they worked.  An arrow thudded into my shoulder, causing me to duck and grunt in pain.  It had come through the shattered window.  Using the controls as cover, I sent the ship into a rapid climb and turned on every runic device tied to the ship’s core.  Then, I destroyed all the controls on the ship—fusing the runes into a solid mass.

Unless they had a metal mage, this ship would burn up all its aether and then plummet from the sky. Pirates were crawling through the shattered window and coming through the door so it was time to leave.  I peeked around the console and spotted a pirate near the bow directing men angrily.  I used my exchange ability again.   Being on the bow, I could take in the fight better.  The ship I was on was heading up toward others that were scattering out of the way.  I pulled the arrow out and did a flash heal on it.  My next target was a brunette human woman looking on in surprise as we were about to zip past them in the wrong direction. I exchanged places with her.

My newest ship looked to be crewed by all human female fighters, and I did not think this Amazonian crew appreciated my prescience.  More than thirty of them were all armored in fine chainmail and looked ready for a fight.  Two stepped forward and had artificed bracers that created a blue transparent body shield as they prepared for a fight.  This group did not look like pirates.  Their ship was not black like the other Black Marauders either.  It had a dark blue color and an aged look to it.  “Where is Lydia?” One of the older women asked me angrily.  It sounded like the woman I had exchanged with was important to her.

“I put her on that ship,” I pointed up at the large black transport headed skyward.  I added, “I set it to drain its aether crystal core.  If you don’t catch up to it, Lydia will fall from the sky with everyone else on board once the core is drained.”

The graying woman’s forearm flexed as she gripped her sword and studied me.  “Who are you?”

I bowed slightly, keeping my eyes on the mercenaries, happy for a reprieve.  I took a moment to check my aether reserves and nearly stumbled in surprise.  I had just under three percent remaining.  The adrenaline of the fight had caused me to ignore the rapidly depleting core. I needed to get on the ground and to the Shiny Platinum.  I answered the women with a smile, “Storme Hardlight, High Mage of Skyholme at your service.”

The woman was still angry but smirked, “If you are at my service, then I want my niece back on my ship. Otherwise, I will be sending you overboard.”

I frowned as I healed my muscles from overusing overdrive for so long. “I introduced myself, but you have not introduced yourself. Are you here for a sightseeing tour of the city? I do not sense you are a member of the Black Mauraders.” I noticed the ship had stopped descending and starting to rise in pursuit of the ship I had sabotaged. Even delaying this small force would help.

The woman bowed mockingly, “Captain Myra Hawk of the Valkyrie Slayers.” Her women were advancing on me, and I sensed at least three mages readying spells for a blitz attack.

“So Mercenaries? How much are the Mauraduers paying you?” I asked, moving to the railing.

Myra answered, not stopping her approach with her squad, “Five thousand gold for the assault and a share of the plunder from the city below.”

“Well, if I paid you ten thousand gold right now, would you forget the contract and attack one of these other ships?” I waved at the cloud of pirate ships around us.

She held up her hand for her troop to stop their advance. She looked up at the shop with her niece and then responded, “Twenty thousand,” she countered, thinking I was joking.

“Agreed!” I tossed two large mithril coins on the deck, waved, and jumped over the rail. I may have just given away a lot of gold, but if it had the slight chance to take two ships out of the assault, it was worth it.

As I fell from the ship, I did not plan to use my exchange ability again. My aether was just too low. I planned to use my feather fall ring instead to get on the ground and make my way to the Shiny Platinum. Fortune was not with me as I was headed for the deck of one of the ships. It was crowded with people, and I decided to use my exchange ability on the largest humanoid on the deck. It was an ogre, and there was a backlash as it exceeded the five-hundred-pound limit of the ability.

The ability still functioned but took much more aether than I wanted to give to it. I was in the midst of the pirates and tried to blend in, but a massive ogre had just stood where I was. I quickly got distance and was saved as a screaming ogre crashed into the deck, crushing a few pirates and causing a distraction as I jumped over the rails to continue the last hundred yards to the ground.

I had the ring active for the last part of my descent. Gravity quickly took me to the ground, and I tried to angle my flight slightly. When I was fifty feet from slamming into the cobblestones, I suddenly slowed and settled down gently in the street. I had managed to land in between the upper city and Shiny Platinum. I had under a mile to reach my mother.

It was not as close as I would have liked, as pirates were already in the upper city and at the docks. I looked to the skies as I started my run. There were a few Wasps still harassing the edge of the formation of pirate skyships, but the transports had been cleared to land. Aether cannons from the city fired up into the sky. They overcame one skyship shield and started to blow chunks of it. Everything was chaotic above as I ran without my lightning reflexes active.

The streets were empty of people but had debris from skyships everywhere and even a few bodies, both Skyholme Navy and Black Marauders. Thunderous magic was being used in the sky and the city now. The war zone was more than dangerous. I passed a building crushed by a pirate skyship—the same one I had crashed the dwarf gunship into. Pirates who had been on the deck lay strewn about like dolls cast carelessly aside.

I brought my falchion to my hand and killed a few pirates who were heavily injured and barely moving. I did not want to risk them getting healed and put back into the fight. I did not pause long as I needed to reach the Shiny Platinum as the wide thoroughfare I was on gave me a line of sight to the smoking docks.

My heart fell as there was fighting in the street in front of the Shiny Platinum. A thick crowd of pirates surrounded the entrance as spells and arrows were sent at the building’s front and balconies. Two pirates, an orc and a human, detached from the engagement. I didn’t hesitate to meet them, activating my aether shield and lightning reflexes without overdrive. I had very little aether left and needed to get into the building as quickly as possible.

The orc was good and blocked with his shield to create an opening for his sword and his human companion. He had not counted on my sword being enchanted. My blade cut through his shield and his arm. The shock of the strike gave me the time to move past his blade and kick him into his companion. Three more pirates peeled off from the crowd, attacking the Shiny Platinum. I was going to get overwhelmed, which would not have been a problem if I had a lot of aether left.

I removed a woman’s leg below the knee. She was only wielding daggers, and I had much longer reach and speed. I took a few blows to my aether shield as I was quickly surrounded. If I went into overdrive, I could handle them but would run out of aether in less than a minute. I was going to be left with little choice.

A roar from beyond the pirates had a tall man wading through the pirates toward me, unconcerned with the danger he was putting himself in. The pirates backed away from the massive man as his massive blade sung in the air from the speed at which it was moving. Gareth reached my side, breathing heavily, covered in cuts and blood of his enemies. “Storme, you are a bit late, so we started without you!” He huffed in greeting while blocking a blade, stepping forward, and punching the woman with his gauntlet.

“Let’s work our way to the Shiny Platinum!” I said, stepping inside his guard and stabbing the human male behind him in the throat. We had not fought together in a long time, but it returned to us, and soon, the pirates just backed away from us and let us make our way to the entrance. Pirates flowed past the building, heading deeper into the city for easier prey.

Gareth was breathing heavily, “When the alarms sounded, I got my delve team here as quickly as I could. We managed to take care of the enemy mages, but Avenida was heavily wounded. Can you heal her?”

Four of the Shiny Platinum guards were outside the entrance, all sporting wounds, and three others, two men and a woman I did not recognize, were with them. I assumed they were Gareth’s delve team members. I entered the building and ended my lightning reflexes. All the glass had been shattered, and injured people were strewn about. Gareth called from behind me, “Storme, I can not leave the entrance, or they will rush us.”

A young girl yelled, “She is over here!” I moved to Avenida and recognized her from the Dungeon Academy. I had not known her name. The young girl who directed me noted, “She already took two healing potions but has not healed.”

I leaned into her and checked on Avenida with my healing spell. Her blonde hair was matted with blood, and her eyes were closed, and her breathing was shallow. The fighting was picking up again outside, and I swore. “Damn it, she has shrapnel in her lungs. The healing potion worked too fast and sealed it inside her.”

I took a dagger and cut it into her chest as the young girl gasped. I then used my healing spell to force out an arrowhead and close the wound. I stood but was tired. Fighting was still ragged outside, and more pirates would be landing. Their plan involved securing the city. That meant the heaviest fighting would be in the upper city near the Navy Skyship docks and the Academies. I wanted to rest, but I didn’t have the time. Avenida took a deep breath and looked much better.

The young girl hugged me, “Thank you for saving my sister!” I patted her head and peeled away from her.

I found my mother with Wynna and Ennet inside the main dining room. My mother and I hugged while she cried. I could just hold her briefly for now. There was no time to grieve for me.

They had been helping the multitude of elderly and children who had taken refuge here. While holding my mother, Wynna said firmly, “One thing the pirates had not counted on was everyone in Skyholme who went to First Year Academy was taught to fight. They will meet large pockets of organized resistance. Callem said the citizens in the capital are mobilizing, and thousands will be sent to join the fight here and liberate Ageis City and the others!”

I nodded as we had just been surprised. The scales would tilt back in our favor in time. If the pirates had been smart, they would have just bombarded all the cities from their skyships. That was where they had the most advantage. I broke from my mother and told her, “I will make them all pay. I will hunt down every Bricio and Black Maurauder on the islands and then in the entire Sphere.” I did not feel it was a hollow boast. My anger had not been satiated by a long shot.

Besides myself, we had four mages at the Shiny Platinum and fourteen fighters. I started to heal everyone I could, figuring the aether was better spent getting men on their feet to help fight. A shout from the front had me stand, “Three more black ships are landing at the docks!” It was time to continue the fight.