Chapter 158

The feather fall ring had worked and worked well.  I had artificed it myself, but it was the first time I had used it.  The adrenaline rush had been intoxicating.  Even if my ring had not activated, I was fairly certain my *lightning reflexes* spell would have given me some protection from the rapid halt of meeting the ground.  I oriented myself and looked to the sky.  Being invisible, I was not worried about being spotted.

Two black skyships zipped overhead toward the pond and crash site.  I ignored the ships and rushed toward the Duskhunters’ residence.  The third Bricio Harbinger had landed inside the walls.  I assumed that was where Abaddon and Baladon were.  I paused in my rush and took out my communication stone that was buzzing inside my dimensional space.

“STORME!  STORME!”  A frantic Isla was yelling through the stone.

“Isla, what is wrong?”  I asked worriedly.

“You are okay!  We saw the skyship crash from the fourth floor of the Spire.  The Duskhunter mage didn’t see anyone leave the skyship before it crashed, and then the echoes of the crash reached us.  It was titanic,”  Isla said, calming down.

I smirked to myself at her concern, “I am fine.  Do you know where the Bricios are?”

There was a conversation in the background as Isla talked with others in the room.  She finally informed me, “The Duskhunter mage just told me about one hundred are at the farmhouse.  They came from all three skyships.  They will head here soon as the farmhouse was empty.  The Duskhunters do not seem worried.”

“I would guess not.  I am going to check on the Bricio Harbingers.  I want to make sure they can not escape after they are repulsed.  Is the  *Sky Wraith* still at the dock?” I asked, formulating a plan.

“It is still docked under an illusion spell, and twenty Wolfsguard are guarding it.  Two Duskhunter mages are sustaining an aether shield and illusion over the ship,” Isla informed me. The *Sky Wraith* had the old, damaged paired aether crystals from the *Maelstrom.* It was only intended to evacuate the Citadel. However, I now had four powerful aether crystals from the Sky King in my dimensional space.

“Only contact me if you need help. I am going to try to disable the Harbinger inside the Duskhunter residence,” I told her firmly. She had started to say ‘*be careful*,’ but I cut communication before she finished.

I connected to Leda next as she had a communication stone to talk with Sebastian, and he would know how the fight the fight was going. I asked her for an update, and she activated both stones together so I could hear Sebastian directly, “Aegis City has been retaken with the fleet and the help of the Sadian soldiers. There are no longer Black Maurader ships over the city. The Sadian soldiers are routing out the remaining ones in the city. Solaris City still has a lot of fighting on the ground, but the wind is favoring us there.”

“And the capital?” I asked, unable to see the city through the trees other than some smoke.

“It is a stalemate over the city but in our favor. We have thirty ships charging their aether crystals on Titan’s Island. When they gain enough charge, we will tilt the scales and regain control of the skies,” Sebastian said heavily. “The city is going to take time to regain control. The pirates control the Citadel and all the ports.” I knew that in the meantime, he was going to have to sacrifice a lot to maintain the stalemate.

“One of the Bricio Harbinger threats has been removed, and I am working on a second. The Bricios are at the Black Spire and trying to claim the ancient wizard’s library for the Sky King,” I told him what I had overheard.

“Do you want Callem to send men from the Capital to help?” He asked concerned.

“No, the Duskhunters have everything well in hand. I do not think the Bircios will be able to breach the tower. I might even be able to take the *Sky Wraith* into the sky to help in the fight,” I informed him. “Let Leda know when you plan your counter-assault, and she can tell me.”

As I ended the communication, it sounded like things were not quite as bad as they had appeared. The cities had endured a lot of destruction, and the Skyholme fleet was wrecked, but the Black Mauraders might yet be driven back. Maybe removing the flagship of the Sky King had helped more than I had thought.

The two Black Maurader ships were circling over the pond not far away. I frowned as I had hoped they would have left to help in the skies over the city. My wishes were half answered as one of the ships rose quickly and headed toward the city. I lamented not having secured the communication stone on the bridge of the *Dark Passenger*. It would have allowed me to eavesdrop on what the Sky King was planning.

I found the path from the Spire to the dungeon and followed it to the Duskhunter residence, which was more akin to a small fort with imposing walls and defenses. The Bricios were making full use of the structure and had men on the gate guarding it and their skyship within.

I had been given a tour of the structure and knew the defenses included anti-invisibility runes. If I got within twenty yards of the walls, all invisibility up to tier three would be disrupted. Even Bleiz’s necklace would not work. I was also certain the runes were currently powered. I circled wide of the structure toward the rear wall.

I was guessing the Bricios had not been able to take over the actual controls for runic defenses. Those defenses would have altered my approach when I climbed the walls if they did. There were no Brico guards on the rear wall, and I used my aether shields to create steps to scale the wall and land on the other side quickly. My invisibility ended, as expected, but I think I managed to get inside unseen. No alarms sounded, and no one came rushing toward me. The sole black ship circling overhead was a half mile away searching between the trees.

The Harbinger was seated in the only cradle within the walls. It proudly bore the name *Phobos*. This was Abaddon’s ship. I smirked as I had dropped the skyship, *The Stuffed Goose*, on it at the Spire months ago. They must have repaired it as there were no signs of damage.

I did not pause long as I moved toward the docked ship.  Only a few men were on the deck, and they were all focused away from me.  If I could sneak aboard and remove the aether crystal, then the Bricios would be left with only a single damaged skyship on the pond.  The *Dark Passenger* had removed part of the deck of one of the ships, and the other should be destroyed from the direct impact.

I walked along the length of the familiar ship design.  I had worked on enough Harbingers to know a few tricks.  The stern had heavy shuttered windows.  My metal shaping ability made quick work of the hinges and allowed me to crawl inside.  This was the captain’s cabin on most Harbingers, and it looked like that was the case for the Phobos.  Abaddon’s cabin smelled rank like he had not done laundry in some time.  How hard was it to bring in someone with the *cleanliness* spell?

I replaced the shutters and cast my own *cleanliness* spell just so I would not have to smell him.  I spent a few moments searching the cabin as well.  Three small chests contained trays of coins.  One was all large silver coins, and the other two were all gold coins.  It was not a lot of value, but I moved all three chests to my dimensional closet anyway.  I estimated maybe three thousand gold in total.

He had a fair number of weapons in the cabin, but none were artificed.  I found a few captain’s journals and took those.  On his bookshelf, his flavor of literature seemed to revolve around stories and had no value to me.  I had wasted enough time and opened the door.  “Well, that was a mistake.” An *alarm* spell activated, causing a long, low whistle to emanate from the door. It was a weak version of the spell but still very effective as I heard feet pounding on the deck above.

I exited the room, went two doors down, and shouldered my way into the locked core room.  No one was in here, and the ship’s indigo tier six aether crystal glowed, giving the only light in the room.  It was small, just larger than my fist, but also probably one of the best aether crystals Skyholme had to power skyships before Abaddon absconded with it. I did not waste time taking the crystal and storing it as the men descended the stairs.  I was not sure why I was worried.  It was not like these men were as powerful as the Mage Hunter.  With *lightning reflexes* active, I stepped into the corridor and easily moved through the Bricio soldiers.  They stood no chance, and only three even had an aether shield.

Twelve was the final count.  Abaddon had only left twelve men on board to guard his ship.  Maybe a few more at the gates.  After the ship was disabled and the crew killed, I walked out onto the deck, cleaning the blood off my person with a *cleanliness* spell.  This gave me a view of the gate, and a pair of arrows bounded off my aether shield.  There were only two men on the portcullis.  Each had a crossbow and was reloading.  I exchanged with one of the soldiers and removed the head of the second without hesitation on arriving.  I leaped to the ground from the wall and got distance from the wall to cast invisibility again. That had been extremely easy.

It had been too easy as the Black Maurder ship was hovering over the *Phobos*.  The Sky King now knew I had lived through the crash.  If he sent more ships to deal with me, it could make things complicated.  A man jumped from the ship down to the deck of the *Phobos*, and landed softly.  The Mage Hunter had grown a new foot and was looking for me.  Well, he could waste time searching the Phobos.  I took off at a run down the path toward the Black Spire.

The Black Spire stood as I approached, and my invisibility ended from the Spire’s defenses. I walked right up to the two Wolfsguard guarding the door.  The Duskhunter dark elf illusionist, Marigold, appeared out of nowhere and cast a spell on me, “It is the High Mage,” she confirmed.  They moved aside, and I entered the tower.  The first floor was packed with people, mostly unfamiliar children in expensive clothing.  Mera and Fera’s brother’s family was here, as well as most of the crippled Wolfsguard from my estate.

Freya appeared out of nowhere and rushed to hug my waist.  I patted her head while she held me tight.  Marigold said, “Most of the Hunters are on the fourth floor with Relik for the defense.  He should be down in a moment.”

“I am here now,” the dark elf said from the stairs.  “High Mage, we have been monitoring the situation.  You have traitors among the Wolfsguard.”  The handful of Wolfsguard in the room tensed on their weapons, eyeing me and their companions.  Relik ignored them and continued, “The Bricios met with four Wolfsguard at the farmhouse, and he gave them weapons to fight.”

“Impossible!”  Asger, the old white Wolfsguard, said, emerging from the crowd.

I thought about it and asked, “Are all your people accounted for Asger?”

Asger looked at the group around him and at the floor above, thinking.  “Yes.  Just two were missing when we came here for protection.  One was on Stonefell Island, and the other was a young Wolfsguard who liked to explore the other estates,” he said confidently.

It had been a long time, but I asked, “Have the missing Wolfsguard ever been found?  The ones that served the Bricios among your number and disappeared when I first met you?”

His eyes went wide in realization, “We assumed they took their own lives as many of our kind do once their bonded is dead. They served Otieno, so we assumed…”

I nodded to Relik, “The Wolfsguard you saw were not part of Asger’s community.”

Relik nodded, “Fine.  The Bricio group will be coming soon.  Will you be part of the defense, High Mage?”

“No.  I am going to go to the *Sky Wraith* and replace the aether crystals.  The major counterattack from Titan’s Shield should come in a few hours,” I will be taking the *Sky Wraith* into the fight.

Freya’s grip on me tightened.  I had to peel her away, “Don’t worry, Freya.  I will be okay.”  I turned to Relik, “I came from your Guild Residence.  There is a Harbinger skyship there.  I took the aether core crystal, and the ship is yours after this mess as a bonus for your assistance.”

A short man behind Relik leaned into him and whispered in his ear.  Relik frowned before speaking, “Our guild bursar would like the altered contract in writing to include the skyship as a prize.”

“I don’t have a lot of time...” I started to say, but the short man waved his hand over a parchment, and script flowed upon the page, rapidly creating the contract.  He handed it to me with a large smile.

I did not have time to read the small and lengthy contract.  “I don’t have time to read this Relik.  You are going to have to take me at my word.”  I paused before adding, “The *Phobos* and everything currently on board are yours at the conclusion of this.  I have the aether crystal, and that is not included in the offer.”  I did not know what else the Bricios might have squirreled away on the ship, but I hoped it was not too valuable. Even if it was, I deemed it worth the protection of the powerful delvers.

Relik pushed the small man aside, “Agreed in principle, High Mage.”  Relik had a communication stone buzz, and he held it up for all of us to hear.

“Relik, the group is coming.  They picked up a few more.  Including a Black Maurader that was dropped from the skyship,” a feminine voice through the stone.

“That would be someone calling himself the Mage Hunter, Relik.  I fought him, and he has some type of anti-magic field around his body,” I informed the dark elf.

“Sounds interesting,” Relik said, amused.

“I am going to replace the aether crystals on the Sky Wriath and then join you to fight the Bricios,” I said while rushing out of the Spire. A black and white cat was at my side, and I was not sure where they had come from.

The illusion of hiding the *Sky Wraith* was good, as the ship appeared to be just another building on approach. I knew the amount of aether to sustain a large illusion was less than making something invisible. Pakkam was off the roof and waved to me, “When you get closer, you will be inside the illusion,” he yelled.

I passed through the front door of the building and the box illusion. The skyship cradle with the Sky Wraith was there. A number of my Wolfsguard were around, and I rushed aboard to talk with Pakkam. “Pakkam the Bricios are attaking the Spire. I am going to replace the aether crystals on the Sky Wraith, but send what men you can spare to help the Duskhunters.”

“Understood, High Mage. Seven of my men are there already and Relik told me to guard the skyship with the rest,” he explained why not all his men were at the Spire. I nodded and climbed up the ramp and went to the control room.

The familiar crystals were here, and removing them took just a few moments. I pulled out two of the harmonic crystals from the Sky King and laid them inside the runic formation, securing them. I thickened the aether feeds around the stones. Both were still at just a twenty percent charge as they would not recharge in my dimensional space. But this would be more than enough to keep the *Sky Wraith* in the sky in perpetuity as the pair would recharge faster than the skyship could drain them. I did not need to spend more time adding more crystals.

Only Pakkam and two other Wolfsguard were on deck when I emerged from below decks. “Pakkam, the Sky Wraith has unlimited aether now. Do not take to the sky until the assault begins to retake the city. There are a number of Maurader ships above the city, and they are good at coordinating attacks on a single target. I hope to be on board when the fight begins in earnest.”

I rushed off the ship back to the Black Spire. The Bricios contingent of about a hundred were walking toward the Spire. Relik was standing outside with Jasper, Marigold, and three other Duskhunters I did not recognize. A handful of my Wolfsguard were at the entrance to the Spire. Relik looked from the Bricios to me. He grinned, “I figure if everyone came out of the tower, we might scare them off. Best to let them get closer before showing our true strength.”

I moved to stand with the Duskhunters as the Bricios came into focus. Abaddon was leading them in his dirty Skyholme uniform. I did not see his mage brother, Baladon. The Mage Hunter of the Black Mauraders was walking next to Abaddon. Most of the Bricios looked like soldiers but there were nine Wolfsguard in their number. They paused about fifty yards away as Abaddon read the situation.

I could see the Mage Hunter focused on me with a fierce gaze. Marigold was behind me, “That is Devious, the Mage Hunter. He is a well-known mage bounty hunter employed by the Sky King.” Devious sounded like a dumb name, but he also recognized the Duskhunter Guild Crests as he turned to talk to Abaddon.

Abaddon also recognized me. I thought I would be the first to speak, “Abaddon, it is good to see you again. Where is your brother Baladon? We have some unfinished business.”

It was not Abaddon who replied but the Mage Hunter. “What are the Duskhunters doing here? They only delve.” A note of uncertainty was in his voice.

Relik spoke for himself, “We were just visiting and having a local ale when the Black Mauraders spoiled our vacation. It’s not the first time your clutch has spoiled my relaxation.” His had a dead tone in his voice, not at all lighthearted.

Devious, the Mage Hunter, seemed uncertain. The Mage Hunter asked, “Who are you?”

“Relik Fadrae the Colossus. You might have heard of me?” He let a smile escape his lips as Devious’ frown deepened. He studied Relik’s companions. Then he thumbed a communication stone in his hand. Relik didn’t move, so I remained and let the Mage Hunter talk. He finished his message.

After talking quietly, the Mage Hunter finally addressed Relik, “If you care to wait a moment. The Sky King would like to join us before we begin.”

Relik arched his brow, “Sounds like it would make a more fair fight. Tell him to hurry. I am on vacation after all.”