Chapter 160

I breathed relief as the black dragon ended its attempt to intercept when the Maelstrom altered its course away from the Black Spire.  There was no way the dragon could match the speed.  The Sky Wraith was proceeding to slow crash into the orchards a distance away, its runes being a mess from the dragon’s claw attacks, and Pakkam had little control over the skyship.

The Mage Hunter didn’t like my focus wandering from him and charged me.  Some type of air compression was holding me in place as it felt like impossibly strong taffy when I tried to move.  I did not know what spell they had used, but there was intense pressure on both my legs.  The immobilization made it hard to parry the Mage Hunter’s swing.  I succeeded but exposed myself to a shield bash to my face.  My aether shield was expended in a blue flash, and his metal runic shield connected solidly, breaking my nose.

I was only dazed for a moment, but Abaddon took the opportunity to attack from my left.  I cast arcane web on the ground to slow him down and barely parried another aggressive swing by the Mage Hunter.  My heart was thudding, and my anger grew at the dwarf mage holding me here.  It had to be a tier two or three spell.  Abaddon was at least caught in the web momentarily, but the Mage Hunter circled and dissolved my webbing around him.

The few seconds of reprieve allowed me to figure out how I had been caught.  It was an evolved air shield spell.  Similar to my own aether shield spell but used air as a medium.  I guessed the dwarf specialized in air magic as his force blast that knocked me back was a spell also from that sphere of magic.  He had created a cylinder of air around my legs and just cinched it shut.

Swinging my blade through the restraining air did not end my confinement, and the dwarf smiled at my futility. Baladon had been funneling aether into a growing fireball for the last few seconds, and I could not dodge.  When he released the fireball, I planned to direct it straight up with an aether shield.

The chaos around me continued in slow motion as I was in an accelerated state.  Baladon finally shouted, “Move away!  I am ready!”  The Mage Hunter backed away, and Abaddon retreated next to his brother.  A basketball-sized blue fireball spun between his hands, the heat not affecting him, but the super-heated air was blowing his hair back.  It was mesmerizing to watch the blue plasma swirl.  “Don’t worry, I won’t make the same mistake again,” Baladon sneered.

The fireball zipped toward me much faster than I remembered from our last encounter at the Black Spire. Baladon had been advancing his spell. His target was the ground to my left, far enough away it was out of my aether shield range. I still put up a layered aether shield, dropping my aether armor. I closed my eyes and activated my thermostatic aura, maximizing its effects to keep the air cool.

The blast was so intense it blew through my aether shields, and the heat washed over me. I only remained conscious because of the effect of my lightning reflexes, which allowed me to ignore most of the powerful concussive waves. The dwarf’s air anchor held me in place, and the femur on my right leg snapped. I used a flash heal and opened my eyes to find the Mage Hunter charging with Abaddon right behind him, “Go right!” The Mage Hunter ordered as he went the other way. Four on one just was not fair. Suddenly, I was free of the air restraints.

I looked up to find the dwarf’s head slowly rolling from its body, Jasper behind him. Baladon stumbled away in fear as the dark elf scout turned to him. “The bald look is good on you,” Jasper said before turning to Baladon. My hair had been burned away, but it was not a concern as I was now free.

I dashed left to intercept Abaddon first—I was still directly healing to my femer, but it was good enough to continue the life or death fight. He was caught off guard as I swung my falchion. It was an easy block for him, but my alarm spell on the tip of the blade went off. The flash and thunderous sound was not blocked. Abaddon was blinded and disoriented as he tried to interpose his shield and back away. I sliced through his knee, taking the leg off, and turned to defend against the Mage Hunter.

Abaddon was not recovering from the missing limb, and I counted him out of the fight for now. A flurry of angry exchanges occurred between the Mage Hunter and me, with me gaining the better of it. With his dwarf companion no longer in support, I was able to cut him multiple times as I healed my body. Jasper asked, “Keep this one alive?” He was referring to Baladon.

“No,” I grunted as I focused on the Mage Hunter. I was a little peeved that Jasper was not helping against the Mage Hunter, but glad he had removed the two mages. The Mage Hunter finally broke away and gave me a chance to sort out what had been happening.

The black dragon was a few hundred yards overhead but was not focused on our fight. Instead, it was studying the approaching ships. The action made me think he did not know them. Were they ships from the Principality of Marstom? Relik and the other Duskhunters were staying close to the Spire, only Jasper had come to help me. That made sense; if the dragon had returned and targeted the people in the Spire, it might have been too late to react.

The dragon turned back to view us on the ground with contempt and anger. It dove toward Relik, Marigold, and two other of his companions. Relik yelled, “It is going to breathe!”

The black dragon abruptly halted and exhaled black and green heavy rain at the four Duskhunters. The rain of acid slid off a shield covering the four companions. The ground around them smoked and hissed. The acid splashed on the Black Stone of the Spire turned clear and did not affect the structure. There was some lack of movement other than Jasper nonchalantly bending over to pick up the five large adamantine coins and whistling in appreciation.

The Mage Hunter started to back away smartly. It gave me time to remove Abaddon’s arm when he tried to block me with his blade, and I followed it with a slash to remove his head. The frustrated dragon roared and zipped into the sky toward the oncoming new fleet. The Mage Hunter broke into a run toward the Onyk Pegasus, and the few surviving Bricios and Black Mauraders did likewise. Without their leader and a number of their more powerful members killed by the Duskhunters, it was time for them to run.

I continued healing and went to my Wolfsguard to try and save as many of the injured as I could. Letting the Onyx Pegasus leave was not a decision I took lightly, but the Duskhunters were remaining at the Spire, and I lacked the confidence to pursue them. I checked, and my exchange ability was still being negated by something.

Nine dead Wolfsguard and another eight had been maimed as I moved among them, and the Onyx Pegasus lifted off. The black dragon engaged the approaching ships in the sky above, and I still had no idea who they were but was grateful they were on my side. From over the city, a number of the Black Maurader ships were rushing to join the dragon as it dodged aether cannons and closed on the first ship.

I was saving the last of the alive Wolfsguard, who had a severed spine and shattered knee. Relik spoke from behind me, startling me a little, “Pirates, fighting pirates, interesting.”

I looked over my shoulder at the dark elf, “You can see that far?” It was probably over three miles above us.

Marigold answered, “I am helping him. Do you want to see what we are?”

I rushed to finish my healing, stood next to them, and nodded. My vision swam as I resisted the spell and then let it overtake me. My perspective was over the ship the black dragon had just latched onto and was tearing apart, looking to disable its runes. Chunks of wood flew along with humans, minotaurs, and beastmen.

The mismatched crew looked like pirates as they struggled against the dragon in their midst. The other ships had momentarily halted their aether cannons firing in fear of hitting the besieged ship. Seeing no alternative, they started firing again. The dragon took one solid strike to its wing before spewing acid onto the ship, covering the deck and crew, and then launching itself away.

The dragon’s flight struggled as it reached its approaching fleet. The new pirates fired aether cannons but managed another strike, maintaining a tight formation as they looked ready to engage the Black Mauraders. Marigold’s vision slid along the pirate ship decks, taking each one in as she scanned them.

My impression was the same as Relik’s: they were a collection of pirate ships, but the hulls varied from black to various brown wood colorings. Each ship had varied races on the deck, armed, armored, and ready for a fight. Relik said, “Move to the ship high and right, Marigold. It appears to be the one in charge.”

Marigold’s sight spell did just that, moving rapidly to the ship Relik wanted to see. The bow named the ship was The Prancing Eagle. The Prancing Eagle was a large ship, and the deck held a group of ruffin minotaurs and a few elves. The image flashed over the crew on deck, and Marigold was swinging the image to another ship. “Go back. In the stern, there were two elves standing side by side. Can you get a closeup?”

Marigold complied, and on the stern deck, there was a tall black-haired elf with golden eyes directing the crew of the ship. Next to him was a very familiar face. Half a head shorter than the apparent elven Captain, her silvery blonde hair was pulled into a tight ponytail. She was wearing tight black leathers with a blood-red belt. She was scanning the skies and the formation of ships that were getting ready to engage the Black Mauraders. “Aelyn,” I whispered in disbelief.

Relik’s voice came to my ears, “You know one of them?” He asked curiously.

“The woman. The half-elf with blonde hair,” I stated in awe.

“Well, she appears an ally, or at least an enemy of the Black Mauraders,” Relik stated plainly.

“I am going up there. Do you want to come?” I was pulling out my communication stone to call the Maelstrom. The vision ended.

Relik shook his head, “No. My task is to guard the Spire behind me. I have no cause to take it to the skies.” He cocked his head and smiled, “If you can get the pirates back down here, I will fulfill my obligation to you and defend your black monument.”

I nodded in understanding. Relik had not betrayed me, but his loyalty was to the assignment—and his daughter inside the Spire. It took the Maelstrom just a few minutes to speed back and land at the Spire. The ships were already engaged high above. Before I boarded, Marigold said, “Be careful, High Mage. It may just be an adult black dragon, but they are not easy to deal with. It has reverted to its human form and is back on the Onyx Pegasus.”

“Thank you,” I acknowledged the five members of the Duskhunters nearby as I raced up the ramp. My aether was still a third full, so maybe I could contribute to the fight above. Bleiz met me in the hold as we ascended to the bridge.

Leda and Cilia looked at me, and I told them, “Aelyn is on one of the new ships, and I doubt it is a coincidence. They are fighting the Black Mauraders. Talk to the Admiral and see if he will launch an assault now. It may be our best chance.”

Cilia took the communication stone and started talking to her grandfather. I took the pilot chair and raced the Maelstrom into the fight above. Aeyln’s small fleet was getting hammered by the Black Mauraders, and two ships were already falling towards the island. Another of her fleet had turned and ran. I heard Cilia updating her grandfather on what we were seeing as I raced through the chaotic engagement. Clearly, the fleet Aelyn was part of did not work well together.

I found Aelyn’s ship, the Prancing Eagle, and part of its bow was missing. I found one of the elf crew on the deck, either dead or injured, and targeted him. “Bleiz, I am going to exchange with an elf on the deck. He looks unconscious.”

Bleiz said grumily, “I hate it when you do that. How am I supposed to protect if you keep teleporting away?”

“Learn teleportation or get the exchange ability yourself,” I said with a smirk, and I was gone.

The Prancing Eagle was a mess of bodies struggling, as an aether cannon had done a lot of damage. I raced to the stern to find Aelyn while avoiding a swing by an irate minotaur. I decided against drawing a weapon and just made haste to the stern. I found Aelyn kneeling over the tall elf captain. He looked to be in terrible shape as his right arm was missing. He must have been too close to the aether cannon strike. “Aelyn?” I said tentatively.

Aelyn looked up, her blue eyes going wide, “Storme! Heal him! He may be our only hope of dealing with the dragon! And how in the twenty-three moons are you here? And why are you bald?”

I kneeled to the black-haired elf, smirking, “Well, I am actually from Skyhomle, you see. The baldness was a gift from Baladon.”

My attempt at humor was interrupted as Aelyn barked at the minotaur who was pursuing me, “Glint, he is on our side!” The minotaur paused, rage on his muzzle subsiding. He huffed and turned away to focus on the mess below. She turned to me, “Can you save him.”

I had already done a diagnostic and started the healing, “Yes. I can not replace the arm, but I am healing him now.” I think I had been hoping for more than being ordered to heal the Captain of the ship. I tried to talk with Aelyn, “So, how have you been?”

“Not the time, Storme. The cursed Black Mauraders are ravaging my fleet,” she hissed, studying the skies.

“Your fleet?” I looked up at her.

A guilty look on her face, “Yeah, well, I kind of used the Skyholme’s Heart Stone to buy the fleet.”

“And my ship and crew as well,” the healed elf below answered in a moan. “This is the man you were so keen on saving? He doesn’t look like much.” The one-armed elf struggled to his feet and smiled, holding out his good hand, “Captain Hyperion, pirate and, I guess, mercenary extraordinaire.”

He was a little pale from blood loss, and the relief on Aelyn’s face had a surge of jealousy in me. I shook his hand, “Thank you for coming to our aid, Captain Hyperion.”

“No problem, though it looks like our assistance is not going to factor much into the outcome.” He looked into the skies, “Captain Galton and Captain Odessa are fleeing, Aelyn. Don’t think you got your gold’s worth out of them. Maybe we should think about doing the same. The Prancing Eagle is already going to be costly to repair.”

Aelyn looked to the skies and followed the copper-skinned Maelstrom as it zipped around, “That is my ship,” I said with some pride at the extremely fast ship.

“I am aware,” Aelyn said uncomfortably. “We were in Lloth a few weeks back, and you left quite an impression.”

“Why were you in Llorth?” I asked her, but I thought maybe I should be healing her crew at the moment.

“It was on our way here. And I know that is where my mother told you we were going,” Aeyln said guiltily.

“So you were coming back?” I asked hopefully.

“I hoped to return the Heart Stone that my mother stole. But things did not work out that way. Can we talk about this another time?” Aelyn’s eyes were scanning the skies as the Black Mauraders took another of her ships out.

My communication stone buzzed, Leda answered as I was certain Cilia was flying the Maelstorm. “Storme, Admiral Sebastion said the fleet is coming. It will be about an hour.”

“We will not last an hour,” Captain Hyperion said.

“Retreat toward Titan’s Shield. We can meet up with the Skyholme fleet. That is where they will be coming from,” I advised. “I will heal your crew in the meantime.”

Captain Hyperion looked at Aelyn, who ordered, “Do it. Which direction is Titan’s Shield?” I pointed to the small island in the distance. I left them and raced onto the deck to help as many people as I could.

Slowly, Aelyn’s pirate fleet disengaged; only seven remained of the original fourteen. Their efforts had forced two Black Maurader ships to land, but over thirty still floated over the capital, waiting to take everything they could of value now that their attempt to capture the islands looked doomed to fail.

It was promising, and I knew the Black Mauraders had to have used a lot of their ship’s aether in the assault. Aelyn was busy giving orders to the other ships in her much smaller fleet. I asked Captain Hyperion, “So, how are you our only chance at defeating the dragon?”

The Captain grinned, “I think Aelyn overestimates my ability. But if I get close enough to it, I should be able to hold it in place for the aether cannons to finish it. The problem is getting close enough.”

So Aelyn had found herself a powerful mage to replace me. I looked to the skies in the distance and could see the Skyholme fleet. I counted twenty-eight dots, growing rapidly in size. The battle for Skyholme was almost over, and it looked like we were going to win.