Chapter 155 The Sky King

As soon the communication stones wouldn’t work, I immediately knew what the Black Mauraders had planned.  They had used a large number of skyships and attackers in the initial assault to make Skyholme think they committed all their assets to secure three islands for a foothold.

They expected Skyholme to put together a sizable force to retake the three lost islands, thinking they had a chance to win.  Then the hammer came.  First, they cut off our ability to communicate over distance with some type of spell block.  Now, the core of the Black Mauraders Fleet was hitting the capital island.  The Black Mauraders had waited until Skyholme had sent the majority of the fleet away from the capital.

The black dots over the capital appeared steadily as I raced back, and it was not from invisibility.  They were teleporting in as each had a dull flash when appearing indicating a large amount of aether had just been expended.  The amount of aether required to teleport all these ships put a pit in my stomach.  I realized the Black Mauraders’ power was immense and not something I could fight against myself.  Blue lines rose from the Skyhold as aether cannons targeted the skyships overhead.  Powerful aether shields on the enemy skyships flashed when the defenders were lucky enough to hit them.

The Maelstrom approached the city quickly on the edge of the capital island.  Currently, I only counted thirty-two skyships above the island; three of them had the silhouette of the harbinger skyship.  I guessed those were the three Bricio ships.  Bleiz, at my right, said, “I have a bad feeling about this.”

“They are much stronger than the ones we already fought,” I agreed.

I was thinking about getting to the Black Spire and getting everyone on board the Maelstrom when a brighter flash announced the arrival of the thirty-third skyship.  This skyshipship was massive, easily five hundred feet in length, and more oval than ship-shaped.  Its arrival also had the aether cannons on the skyships start to bombard the city.

Powerful aether cannons targeted defenses.  It was not even a battle as the cannons easily destroyed the aether cannons throughout the city.  Many of which did not have any aether shields to protect them. A few aether cannons started to redirect their fire at the Maelstrom, and a single Wasp ship coming from a scouting patrol. Numerous traders started taking off from the city. The attackers ignored them as long as they did not come skyward. It was letting them escape.

I circled around the fleet, being too fast to target. The harbingers of the Bricios were currently in the center of the fleet. The Black Spire was only a few miles from the city, and if I landed, we would be targeted. I should have spent my time repairing the invisible rooms instead of recovering my aether.

It had only been a few minutes into the attack, and I was not expecting support. Most of the ships sent to the attack on Titan’s Shield would take over an hour to return. Like a beehive that had been struck, dozens of small skiffs fell from the Black Maurader Fleet, descending on the city. Fortunately, none were targeting the Black Spire.

We watched somewhat helplessly. Bleiz asked, “Are you going to use your exchange ability?”

I studied the attacking ships, and focused on the Bricio Harbingers. “I would like to get some revenge against the Bricio’s for bringing this armageddon to Skyholme. Right now, they are at the center of the fleet. Using the ability at this distance would take a lot of aether.”

Most of the skiffs were landing around Skyhold and the docks. The Bricios had given knowledge of the defenses. There had been a fair number of changes since they fled. Three powerful aether cannons obliterated skiffs about to land. On three positions quickly came under fire from the skyships overhead. Only one of the cannons got off a second shot, destroying a fourth skiff. A few aether shields flashed below as teams of mages and soldiers started to defend the city.

The Wasp that had been circling with us had taken too many hits and was now retreating, leaving us alone to watch. We were circling about two miles from the fleet, passing over the Black Spire every few minutes. I finally made a decision, “Bleiz, I am going to land on their biggest ship. Maybe I can cause enough of a disruption that I can slow down the assault and give the Navy ships time to return.”

It was not a ship but more of a massive oval platform with buildings and defenses. I was an island unto itself. “Storme, I can see hundreds of men and women on that behemoth. Even you would not last long.”

“There are three lower decks, looking at the porthole arrangement. If I can identify a person through one of the windows, I should be able to sneak aboard. Can you get the Maelstrom back to Leda and Cilia?” I asked Bleiz. His first piloting experience had not gone well.

Bleiz made what I came to realize was his unhappy face with his teeth slightly barred, “I can get the ship back, Storme.”

“Good. Have them mount a rescue mission to the Spire. I will cause as much havoc as I can. Although I am assuming on something that large, there are a lot of redundancy runes and maybe more than one aether power crystal,” I said as I continued to circle. I was just an annoying fly for the Black Maurader Fleet. They had even given up wasting aether cannon shots at me.

As long as I stayed further away than one hundred yards, I should not be able to be targeted by any mages. I once again regretted not owning a spyglass or learning a focused vision spell as I tried to identify someone below decks on the massive ship. “It’s the Sky King,” Bleiz noted. “On the bow, it says Sky King.”

Bleiz had much better sight than me. I could not make out the writing from over two miles away, even if it was three stories tall. I replied, “The Sky King is the regional leader of the Black Mauraders. That must be his ship. I can not see anyone below deck at this distance to exchange with.”

Fighting erupted in the city below, and I angle the Maelstrom to watch from above. Massive explosions and fierce melees could be seen in the streets below, and I frowned. The fighting was much more intense than had occurred in Aegis City. The enemy had a lot of mages and people with abilities, by the looks of it.

“I can see movement on this side of the Sky King below decks,” Bleiz noted.

“I can’t. I need to be certain to establish a visual link with their core to activate the ability,” I focused, but it was just dark through the windows.

“You should have gotten an actual teleport ability,” Bleiz said with a note of humor.

“My exchange ability is much more powerful. Teleportation defenses are much more common. My tier three ability can bypass them. I am guessing that massive skyship has defenses against teleportation,” I lectured Bleiz.

“So we get closer until you can see them?” Bleiz asked.

“Yes, I will go up on top of the Maelstrom, and you can take her close enough for me to use the ability and then get the Maelstrom to safety. Have Leda and Cilia bring everyone together to get to the Spire to evacuate the people there. I will cause enough of a distraction to keep them occupied,” I restated the plan. I made my way up on top of the Maelstrom after reminding Bleiz how the aether shields worked. The last thing I wanted was to take a lucky aether cannon blast.

I opened the top hatch and stood on the small observation deck on the Maelstrom. Even though we were flying at over 1600 miles per hour, the runes kept the wind at bay. I moved over the bridge and tapped hard on the roof. Bleiz took us out of the long loop and toward the large skyship.

At first, I was a little nervous, and then he began a weaving approach as it was only taking seconds to close the distance, and I needed to focus on finding a target. A few smaller aether cannons started firing at us, but tracking the Maelstrom was too difficult. Still, the aether shields flashed twice from glancing shots.

I found my target. A person with long blonde hair had poked their head out the window. I slid down the front of the Maelstrom, in front of the bridge one-way glass, and used my ability.

The unfortunate soul was left in front of Bleiz momentarily before continuing the fall. I surveyed my surroundings. I was in a room alone. I turned and looked out the viewport and saw Bleiz turning away and the blonde woman falling to the capital below, her scream reaching my ears. I was immediately on guard and listening to the ship. I doubted they would figure out what had just happened too quickly. No alarms sounded, and the hallway outside my room remained quiet.

I searched the modest cabin, and it was definitely a woman’s room. I found a cloak that was a little small but had the Black Mauraders symbol on it. I put it on, hoping that there were too many people on this large ship to recognize me as not part of the crew. I was on the lowest deck of the massive ship and stepped into the corridor, invisible. My invisibility unraveled, and I swore.

I was just going to have to trust my cloak would allow me to walk freely. A few people passed at an interception to my right but were not in a rush. I turned left and walked casually through the bowels of this massive ship, looking for the embedded runic workings.

Knowing that people were dying below had me start to increase my pace. I was completely lost and found a mess hall first. About three hundred seats were set up, and only three of the crew were eating. I turned around before they had a chance to see my face. The ship was massive, and I needed to find some way to sabotage it. With a ship this size, I was hoping they would have at least marked the corridors for the crew to navigate.

I wandered aimlessly until I found some stairs going up to the mid-deck. At the top of the steps were two guards. I walked confidently up the stairs, past them, and kept going. One of them had given me a quick side view, but that was all the attention I got. The mid-deck had a lot more activity. A few of the Mauraders were jogging to destinations, and everyone seemed to have a purpose to their walk. The lower deck must be where all the Mauraders were bunked and fed.

This deck had a lot of equipment storage and small hangers with the skiffs. The hanger I walked into was maybe fifty by fifty feet with a large closed barn door. Aether lights kept it lit, and someone was working on one skiff. I walked up behind him and looked over his shoulder. He was casting a metal shaping spell to replenish the runes with gold. I asked with authority, “Why isn’t this skiff in use?”

The young man with short, dirty blonde jumped. He tripped on his feet as he tried to stand. I expected his legs to be asleep from a prolonged session. He sputtered out, “I was told I had nine more hours to get it ready.” He was obviously afraid of me even though he had no idea who I was. I shooed him to the side, and he got out of my way.

I touched the runes and ran my metal sense through them, “Sloppy work. The antigravity runes are not uniform thickness, and the aetheric shielding feed is almost burned out.”

He got some backbone, “I was only told to replenish the maneuvering runes…mister.” He started to get a confused look on his face, looking at my cloak and then my face. I ignored him and checked the maneuvering runes. I could see where he had started the process and how far he had gotten. I traced the wood with my finger and stopped where he was at.

I looked at him, “Not terrible work. You are a bit slow, but your work is acceptable. The shielding needs to be replenished as well.”

He got bolder, “Who are you? Your accent is…”

I didn’t know the ranks of the Black Mauraders, so I just said, “Captain Hardlight. My skyship was taken out, so I am here temporarily. It appears I was not given any assignments, so I have been wandering. I was always fascinated with runic work and had a tier one sensing spell.” I paused as if thinking, “I have not seen the aether core crystals for the Sky King. I hear they are a marvelous site.”

“The fore chamber or aft chamber?” The metal mage asked, interested. I think he just wanted a break from working on the skiff. It took a lot of concentration to replenish runes using normal spellcraft. It was also a slow and tedious process.

“The aft chamber powers the antigravity runes, and the fore chamber powers the aether cannons?” I was guessing it made the most sense. He nodded emphatically. “The aft chamber, then,” I said with a smile.

I followed the mage into the corridor. He took a slight lead on me but seemed uncertain of protocol, so I walked next to him. As we walked, he asked, “So what happened to your ship, Captain Hardlight?”

I didn’t hesitate to respond, “Young mage, it is never polite to ask a Captain how they lost their ship. I still have to answer for the loss of the ship and most of the crew.”

“I thought the Captains owned their ships?” The young mage asked, confused.

“We do, but I took out some loans to get her. From some unsavory people, if you know what I mean?” I winked at him. He nodded and thankfully dropped his inquisition. The walk to the rear aether crystal chamber had us passing a number of crew members, but they just nodded at us or ignored us completely as we passed. Most of them knew the young mage. I learned his name was Dramorn.

When we reached a locked door, Dramorn knocked. A click and a moment later it swung inward. A thin elf was on the other side, and he frowned, “Dramorn, what are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be working on skiff seven?”

“I was, but Captain Hardlight here asked me to show him the aether crystal chamber,” Dramon said placatingly. “He has an excellent metal sense skill,” he added to the frowning elf.

“Captain Hardlight? I don’t know any Captain Hardlight. You should bring him to the Sky King’s lieutenants,” the elf said dismissively.

“I just came on board temporarily. After the city is secured, I am to be sent down to help. I really am a fan, and I heard you administer the most fabulous aether crystals in the fleet,” I said, lavishing on the praise.

I caught him smirking a little. He looked down the corridor where two men walked to a duty station. Everything seemed calm, “Fine. Just a quick look and then bring him above deck. They are expecting the Skyholme fleet to attack in an hour.”

The elf moved aside and let us in. The chamber had four rows of runic panels from floor to ceiling. Each panel had an indigo crystal the size of my head. My jaw dropped open. Four attuned crystals that size—from the same dungeon. Tier six crystals are not tier seven, like the Heartstone of Skyholme, but are the same relative size. All four of these crystals together would probably surpass the amount of aether that Heartstone could store as well. And they would recharge quicker.

The elf was smirking, “Impressive, I know. Four here and two more in the forward chamber, all from the fiftieth level of the Vault of the Tormented Tiger dungeon. The Sky King claimed all six himself on delves.”

That was beyond amazing. Six crystals—all attuned. No wonder this behemoth was in the skies, and they were able to teleport the ships in. I took a step forward, and the elf blocked my way. “You have seen it, now leave.”

“Thank you! It is truly a magnificent sight.” I turned and shut the door as I entered overdrive mode of lightning reflexes. I cast arcane web in the chamber three times in succession to bind the elf and mage Dramorn. I caught them off guard and managed to bind them. The elf was screaming, but my next spell was a privacy bubble. I cast arcane lock on the door and sighed in relief.

The elf was struggling, but he was not very strong, and I was already moving through the webs toward him with my falchion. His head bounced on the floor, and I turned to the young mage. Fear permeated his blue eyes as I approached. “You did good. If you can remain quiet and not bother me, I will leave you alive.” He nodded, and I left him inside a privacy bubble completely restrained by the webbing. I kept renewing the webbing as I worked so her could not escape.

I studied the runic work, and it was beyond impressive. These four stones powered a multitude of runic patterns. My problem was there were two more of these crystals in the fore of the ship. If I took these four, would those two still be able to keep the ship aloft?

I found something reassuring. The gauge on these crystals showed them as being just about twenty percent full. I guessed this ship had been responsible for teleporting the fleet here. I started to decipher the runic controls and eventually smiled maliciously. There was a backup feed from the fore for the antigravity runes, but the maneuvering rune backup had been laid through this chamber. I could cut off their ability to steer the behemoth.

A plan quickly formulated in my head. I had already spent nearly thirty minutes in the chamber, and the floor had my bloody footprints everywhere. Even if this didn’t work, it should still disrupt the assault.

I cut off all the maneuvering runes first. Once they realized they no longer had control, they were going to rush to this room. In fact, a communication stone on a shelf voiced its displease, “What are you doing down there, Kimel!! I just lost steering!!” I ignored the irate bridge.

Next, I coopted the forward propulsion rune so I could control it from the room and applied aether to it. The large ship should be moving forward at its best speed. I quickly walked around the room, damaging all the runes in a quick sweep. Then, I unceremoniously removed the first aether crystal. There was a little bit of backlash in the crystal as it was being drawn from.

I frowned for a moment. That backlash would increase with each aether crystal I removed. I was going to have to cut their aetheric feeds before removing them. The communication stone had a multitude of curses coming through it, and the door suddenly banged, but my arcane lock held.

Well, damn, this was not going to be pleasant. I cut the aether stones from feeding any more power to anything on the skyship. My stomach suddenly felt a little light as the skyship started to fall from the sky. Hopefully, we were no longer over the city. An axe head thudded through the door. Why did they have to be so impatient? I removed the next three crystals, and all four were in my dimensional closet as a pair of axes were tearing the door apart.

Well, I was trapped in the room and smiled. I had disconnected both the invisibility blocker and the communication stone blocker. I could hear my own stone buzzing in my dimensional space, but I needed to get off the ship before it crashed. I turned invisible and was ready to greet the upset pirates.