Chapter 99 Arc 3 Chapter 3

My dreams were heavy with Baladon and Abaddon.  They were plotting revenge against me for killing their father.  Everywhere I went in my dream, they were there in the shadows, ready to put a knife in my back.  When I woke, I had a clear direction.

I planned to fly to the elven city as soon as my crystals were charged.  I would enter the library and find a spell to give me an even greater advantage against the two brothers.  I found everyone in the cargo bay playing a game of cards.  They were drinking and looked up.

Gareth spoke, “Sammie, Remy, Leda, and I went into the city, Storme. There is a lot of conflicting information out there.”

Leda stepped in, “I talked to two young guards at a tavern. Well, they were actually soldiers. The Sadians are fighting on two fronts right now. The duergar dwarf clans from the crust and the Esenem Protectorate elves to the north. Both conflicts appeared centered around the control of a powerful dungeon.”

Gareth rolled his eyes, “Yeah, Leda has a way of making the young boys talk.”

Sammie interjected, “You just wanted to go and try the food Gareth. It was Leda’s idea to gather information from the locals.”

“Oh, he was trying to get some information from that young server,” Leda interjected playfully. Gareth blushed, and I shook my head. He had put a lot of effort into repairing his relationship with Fera, and now this.

“Anything about Skyholme Leda?” I asked, getting the conversation back on topic.

Leda liked being the center of attention and nodded, “The last attack on Skyholme was conducted in concert with the beastkin tribes. One wealthy governor was charged with sending the Emperor seven ships and four hundred men. Instead, he hired mercenaries rather than raising the force from his own lands. That caused some discord in the court.”

Cilia asked a question, “How do the people view Skyholme?”

Leda shrugged, “It is like this far-off fantastical place they see pass through the sky a few times every year overhead. I don’t think the common people care whether the islands are conquered. They have enough issues to deal with. The conflict still exists because the Triumvirate does not generate enough resources from its own dungeons, so we raid the lowlands, and the Sadians are the best target. The Sadians are spread thin in their large territory and have few skyships capable of reaching the islands. Every time they attack us in force, it takes a decade to rebuild their fleet.”

I was shocked. “Wow, Leda you got all that from talking to two soldiers?”

Leda blushed, “No. Some of it I already knew and just confirmed when I talked with them. There are some things not in our history books but are passed down by word of mouth in families. My family has been around for a long time. We knew more than most since our craft relies heavily on dungeon resources.”

The conflict could be solved. The question was who was going to gain the most coin from it. Remy seemed a little twitchy, like he wanted to speak, so I asked, “Did you learn anything, Remy?”

All eyes turned to him, and he nodded, “The large power crystals for their skyships and being imported from the Callisto Federation. I was asking as we needed to secure a better core for the Maelstrom.” I motioned for him to go on. “The Callisto Federation is about 30,000 miles from here, but they sell tier 6 and tier 7 crystals large enough to power our ship.”

One of our goals was to try and secure a larger intact crystal. “I don’t think we will be able to travel that far.” I made a decision, “We leave for the elven city of Lorlth when our crystals are charged.  No one leaves the ship again,” I said, committing to that plan of action.

Remy hesitantly asked, “When we reach Llorth, can we explore that city?”

Expectant eyes studied me at the prospect of walking in an elven city.  “Yes.” Their eyes were happy, but they were essentially a bunch of teenagers exploring the world for the first time. “But stay in groups of two.  First thing when we get there, we will get a set of communication stones so we can all stay in touch.”

The next day we received a message from Bylura.  It was very general and indicated negotiations were going well.  Baladon had been trying to get the Sadians to launch an attack in Skyholme.  Abaddon, being a captain in the navy, had intimate knowledge of the defenses and the naval strength; that is what they were offering in return for being given the governorship of Skyholme.

Gareth was incensed after we read the communication,  “The Bricios would rather see Skyholme destroyed than let it thrive without them.”  He stormed to his own cabin, and I asked Bleiz to keep an eye on him.  I was worried Gareth might get an idea to try and kill Abaddon and Baladon on his own.  Thankfully he cooled off in a few hours.

I used the communication stone, and Callem had already been informed in a meeting about the Bricio’s second betrayal.  The Navy was already working to shift defense patrol routes and altering response protocols.  There should be enough variance from the original defense plans that the Sadians would not gain much of an advantage.  There was a lot of nervousness in the Citadel.  A lot of pressure was being placed on Bylura and Lucian Torrent to strike a peace accord.  The talks were progressing slowly as the Bricios were working against them.

I informed Callem of my plan to visit Llorth before returning to Skyholme. He was quiet for a long minute before he advised, “Be careful, Storme.  I know why you want to go.  I do not think me telling you it is a bad idea will stop you.”  He paused again and then said, “I ask one favor.  Do not let Gareth enter any dungeons.  He needs more seasoning before tackling unknown dungeons.”

“I will do my best. I think we will be fine in Llorth.  We will land in the eastern city.  It is the educational and trade district.  The newest dungeon is a day’s walk, and I will not give Gareth the time to reach it,” I said with a relieved sigh on the other end. Callem’s only son had been lost when delving a dungeon.

No resolution was reached by our delegation by the time our crystals were charged.  Cilia and Leda made the only objections to leaving.  They had spent a lot of time with Bylura and considered her a friend.  Leaving her behind felt like they were abandoning a companion.  In addition to Abaddon and Baladon, it appeared most of the Bricios that had survived were in Goldreach.

Bylura should be fine if she remained in good standing with the emperor and remained in the palace.  If she could reach an agreement, she could instantly use the portal stone network to return to Skyholme. I sent her a letter saying we were leaving. The Maelstrom would return to Skyholme in four days, and we would return to pick her up if called upon.

The Maelstrom lifted off without fanfare.  Leda got us oriented and headed toward Llorth. The forward viewing panel allowed us to see in almost a complete 180-degree arc. Leda had us swing north along the city’s perimeter as we made for our actual course. It gave us a chance to see more of the city. Two mounted griffons flew below us as we circled away.

Gareth shouted excitedly, “That looks like fun, Stormy. We should get some. I have an affinity for riding, so I can probably learn fast.”

In the captain’s chair, Cilia addressed Gareth, “You could always try to join the Dragon Wing, Gareth.”

“Bah, only nobles in Skyholme join the Dragon Wing, and they do not even fight. They just come out on holidays to do aerial maneuvers for the kid,” Gareth scoffed. “They are not even real dragons. Just sky drakes.”

“You know many kingdoms in the Sphere maintain flying calvary. It is a lot cheaper than maintaining a fleet of skyships. I am sure you could learn if you really wanted to,” Remy advised Gareth. “I remember in my youth seeing warriors ride actual dragons. The Northern Star Domain rode genuine black dragons. It was how they maintained their hold so close to one of the tunnels to the Outer Sphere. One black dragon is as large as a Harbinger warship.”

The conversation turned into Remy telling stories he remembered when he traveled with his merchant father. Remy had been abandoned on Skyholme when he was young. His father had checked him into an inn in Aegis City and was off to do a trade run to the other islands but never returned.

When our aether crystals reached 40% charge, I instructed Leda and Cila to look for a place to land. Our crystals were not large enough to make the trip one segment. We would have to land and spend a day and a half recharging. I wanted to leave enough charge in the crystals so we could flee just in just.

Leda reviewed the map on the navigation table, “We can try to find a flat landing spot in the mountains over here. This region on the other side of the mountains is mostly plains. My research said they were mostly filled with nomadic peoples, humans, and halflings. The entire region is devoid of dungeons.”

Our original plan had been to land next to one of the tribes in the plains. I was now rethinking my plan. I was not sure how friendly they were or how strong their warriors were. They could have a dozen mages in their population and be hostile.

“See if you can find somewhere in the mountains. It should give us a good view of possible and be level enough that the Maelstrom remains level,” I went to the viewport to help Cilia look. Sammie and Leda joined me, and we slowly through the mountains.

Leda spotted a granite shelf that was mostly level.  Cilia swung the ship to a very soft landing.  Gareth was about to comment on my own landing skills, but I held up my hand as a mock warning.

When we left the ship via the ramp, it was cold outside.  No snow, just freezing temperatures.  I activated my thermostatic aura and was instantly comfortable.  Everyone else, even bundled up, was in discomfort.  I ordered everyone back on the ship, and they could activate the environment controls.  It would add an hour or more to recharging the power crystals, but that was fine.  We still had six days before the academy classes started.  Gareth said they would remain focused on the radar.  From his monster classes, he thought the only threat this high up would come from the air.

Bleiz stood next to me and seemed unaffected by the frigid temperatures.  “Do you want me to scout the perimeter?  Out to maybe 200 yards, including the cliff?” Bleiz asked.

“I will join you.  The radar didn’t pick up any aerial monsters nearby.  We will just look for any signs of monster activity.  We are fairly high up, and with the cold temperatures, there are probably not many monsters,”  I said, and Bleiz shrugged.  Bleiz’s knowledge outside of Skyholme was limited.  So was mine.

As we walked, the edge of the cliff had a strong updraft and the smell of pine needles.  Through the clouds and about two miles below, there was a small green expanse which I presumed was an evergreen forest.  We didn’t see anything as we did a full loop.  Bleiz said, “It seems safe, but I will take the first watch from the ship.”

I went to the ship’s runic control room to check on the power crystals and inspect the runes. The benefit of using mithril for all the ship runes was there was no maintenance. The ship could fly for centuries before needing to be serviced. The mithril was coated with a line layer of gold that would need to be replenished every century or so of heavy use, but the Maelstrom would stay in perfect working order unless damaged.

I went to my cabin to steady the invisibility spell. I was a few hours into my steady when I heard Bleiz’s voice. I opened my door to hear more clearly, “Incoming monsters. They are climbing the cliff. Two so far!” The roof hatch slammed shut before I could give an order.

Gareth was already rushing out of the cargo hold. I would have preferred to just take off if the monsters were climbing the cliff. We could have flown away and not had to deal with the creatures at all.

I flew down the stairs, Sammie right behind me, to catch up with Gareth. We faced the cliff to see three hulking creatures prodding toward us. They were over fifteen feet tall and looked ugly with bulbous skin, gangly limbs, and black mossy hair. The ground trembled as they closed on us.

Gareth looked a little pale, “Stormy; I think they are mountain trolls.”

“Great, how do we kill them? We have about twenty seconds to come up with a plan, Gareth,” I said confidently.

Gareth spoke quickly, “If there was just one, then maybe we would have a chance. They regenerate too fast to kill.”

“Get the ship in the air!” I yelled to Cilia, watching from the bridge. “Bleiz, take the one on the right! Harass it till the ship is away.” I looked at Gareth, who was gaining courage. “We just need to distract them long enough to get the ship away. Remy will lower the rope ladder,” I encouraged my friend, who nodded.

I rushed forward to the troll on the left, tossing a lightning sphere and then enhancing my reflexes. The ball of energy struck the ground between the two on the left, and it didn’t phase them at all. My target was unable to keep up with me as I was behind him in an instant. My large falchion swung, targeting the hamstring. My sharpness runes cut through bone and tendon with ease. I was surprised when the blade stopped dead in the troll’s femur. It howled in pain—a feminine scream.

Her scream caused the other two trolls to turn. Bleiz attacked with fervor on the side, removing chunks of flesh like he was chopping a tree. Gareth and Sammie beset the distracted middle troll. I did not have time to follow their battles as my troll lashed out with her foot. I had to abandon my sword and summon another enchanted saber. I cast a lightning spear and burned a hole in her stomach, but it closed in two heartbeats as she regenerated. She grabbed my falchion and ripped it free with a grunt and spurt of blood.

She tested the weapon and grinned horribly as her face twisted. I was turning through my spells. Nothing was strong enough to work on this creature. At least everyone in my team had my enchanted weapons. They were harassing the trolls endlessly and avoiding getting hit.

The Maelstrom lifted off the ground, and Bleiz’s troll raced and leaped. The Maelstrom was fifty feet in the air, and the fifteen-foot troll was high enough to grab one of the landing gear legs. I yelled, “Go higher! And shake it off over the cliff! We can handle two!”

Cilia responded and zipped toward the cliff. The troll had no other grip, so it tried to tear the panels around the landing gear back. I dodged the female as the Maelstrom started jerking in the air. The troll was in the inertia sink range, so it would probably be able to hold on. A few panels flew away as the troll made progress. Then the troll fell. He stupidly looked at the landing leg in his hand. He must have ripped out enough of the supports for the leg to free it. If the two-mile fall did not kill it, at least it would take too long to climb back up to play a role in the battle.

The female swung my falchion around inexpertly, and it was easy to anticipate. Bleiz, Gareth, and Sammie were keeping the other troll frustrated. Gareth yelled while rolling away from another swing of the troll’s meaty paw, “Just remembered—these trolls can not regenerate from death. We just need to do enough damage quickly enough to kill one.”

Bleiz asked, breathing heavily, “Will cutting off the head work?” Gareth nodded in the affirmative.

I began to cast my lightning spear at their troll as the group focused on doing enough damage to bring the troll down so someone could behead it. My troll, which I decided to dub the mama troll since she kept trying to break away now and help the mewing other troll getting repeatedly hit by the other three.

Mama troll caught me off guard as she through my falchion at me. It gave her time to get to Sammie. Sammie did not see it coming as the troll kicked her in the back. Sammie was airborne and crashing heavily forty feet away. “Fuck!” I screamed, running at the mama troll. I summoned two long curved daggers and embedded both of them in her lower back. I was hoping for a spinal cord strike, but she whipped around, and I released the daggers while ducking her swing.

She was already starting a kick I planned to dodge when the Maelstrom came out of nowhere and clipped her head. A loud bell toned as the ship raced away, but Mama troll fell to the ground. The earth rumbled as I rolled away, and she sprawled out. Bleiz was quick to act and left his troll to remove mama’s head. He struggled to cut through, and I yelled, “Gareth, he needs a bigger sword!” I rushed to attack the other troll. He was bleeding but rapidly healing. With my lightning spear spell, I got close enough to gain enough accuracy to target the face. Out of the corner of my eye, Gareth took two swung’s to behead mama troll, and the Maelstrom was turning around.

“I will get to Sammie. Make sure the troll is dead and distract this one!” I barked at Gareth and Bleiz. It wasn’t necessary, as my troll turned and fled after the female’s head had rolled free of its body. I raced to Sammie, who was not moving.

I did the diagnostic, and she was barely breathing. Both lungs were filling with blood, and her bones were shattered everywhere in her torso from the kick. How frigging strong were those trolls. I poured spell after spell into Sammie to stabilize her. The Maelstrom returned and landed near us. It had a prominent dent in the hull from the troll head impact. The remaining five landing struts supported her.

“Get Sammie on board before any more trolls show up.” Gareth lifted her easily, and I ran around the battlefield picking up weapons by sending them to my storage space. I was the last one to board, and we lifted off.

Bleiz met me as I climbed the ramp, “You know what? I do not think I like trolls.”

“Me either,” I responded as I went to finish healing Sammie.