Chapter 159

We waited in silence as the minutes ticked by—my small group across from the hundred Bricios and the Mage Hunter, Devious.  Relik seemed content to wait everything out.  At this point, I was willing to trust his judgment.  I was concerned as I could hear explosions in the distance within the capital’s walls, but my fight was here.  Having the confident Relik next to me and knowing my Titan’s Shield was safe helped calm my anxiousness to do something.

While I waited, I studied Abaddon, whose hair had grown out and beard had filled in.  Abaddon looked to be in rough condition, matching the state of his captain’s cabin on the Phobos.  His captain’s uniform was worn; I guessed it smelled as bad as his cabin.  He had really let himself go—or maybe he just did not have servants to clean up after him any longer.  His body was still lean, and he appeared healthy of body, but his sunken eyes indicated he was perhaps not fit of mind.

A black elongated skyship designed to cut the air even without the aid of magic passed overhead.  This new ship rapidly circled the Black Spire, inspecting the landing site.   Marigold, the illusionist mage, focused on the ship, “Relik,” she whispered, “I can shield us for a few minutes if the aether cannons fire on us but will not be able to protect the Sky Wraith or maintain the illusion concealing it.”

Jasper, Relik’s scout who had trained Bleiz, added, “Three persons fell from the ship with tier three invisibility.  They are moving behind the Spire to circle us.  Do you want me to send Shaede and Olaen to deal with them?”

Relik gave the slightest of nods, and I did not see Jasper do anything to signal the two mentioned members of the Duskhunters, but I assumed it was done.  We waited while the skyship landed behind the Bricio contingent.  The name on the bow of the glossy black ship was The Onyx Pegasus.  It settled to the ground, and we waited while a man in billing black robes leaped from the top deck to the ground.  The Bricio men parted as he approached and walked through them.

I could see others coming from the Onyx Pegasus, including Baladon Bricio.  He looked thinner than I remembered, but his clothes were well-maintained.  Did he defect to the pirates, or maybe he was a prisoner for insurance so the Bricio would not betray the Black Mauraders?  I did not have time to puzzle out why he was with the Sky King and not his brother.

The Sky King was tall, approaching my own height of six foot three.  His black hair was well-groomed, and streaks of gray could be seen, yet his face appeared youthful.  The only visible weapon on his body was a knife in his belt.  I was guessing he was a mage or had a number of powerful abilities.  He was extremely powerful if he had obtained the quartet of crystals from a dungeon. He was confident as he approached alone to stand ten feet from Relik.

He studied Relik, “Dark elves,” he said bitterly.  “Relik, was it?  What are your kind doing up here and interfering with the Maurader’s business?”

“Relik Fadrae of the Duskhunters,” Relik informed him flatly.  Maybe Relik thought he would be more impressed.

The Sky King pinched his nose like he had a headache, “Duskhunters. I am told you are a guild of delvers. Since you are seekers of coin, what will it take for you to go away?”

Relik didn’t respond, just arched an eyebrow in apparent question. I suddenly got uncomfortable. The Sky King released a long, irritated breath and made an offer, “Five hundred thousand?”

Relik’s eyes opened a little in surprise. Five hundred thousand was enough to purchase a top-tier skyship, crystals included. “If I accepted your offer, I would violate my contract with the High Mage.”

“One million, then,” the Sky King said impatiently.

Relik tilted his head slowly from side to side in consideration. Shit, he was going to betray me for gold. Relik started to nod, “Sky King, you make an offer that is hard to refuse. However, the Black Mauraders have a history of failing to honor deals. Can you prove you have the coin to make good on your offer?”

The Sky King’s face hardened at being questioned, “I have lost more today than planned, dark elf. I was told,” he turned his back to Relik to give Baladan and then Abaddon a look, “that Skyholme had half the number of ships we encountered and no protective magicks or powerful mages.”

He returned back to meet Relik’s eyes, “If what I want is not within this tower, then I am going to be extremely upset. I understand you are very good at killing animals in dungeons. I have killed more than a few in my day, but I have evolved and become very good at killing people.”

Relik did not react to the threat and just looked behind him at the Black Spire. Relik asked slowly, “And what do you expect to find instead?”

The Sky King grinned, “Secrets that can tear the moons apart! Secrets of the Sphere and more ancient secrets.” He reached into a small pocket and produced five large coins. I recognized them immediately—adamantine. Those five large coins represented five hundred thousand gold. “Now, Relik Fadrae, the Colossus of the Duskhunters Guild. I have half your payment here. The other half will be given after you do not interfere and let me handle my business.”

The Sky King rolled the coins in his hands, and Marigold confirmed, “They are genuine.” I had not sensed her use any magic, but she sounded confident and had a note of awe in her voice.

Relik turned to me, “High Mage, it appears I have an offer to abandon the contract I accepted to defend you and the people of the Spire. Do you wish to say anything?”

I had been standing behind Relik, to his left. I had been running through possible scenarios, and none of them were good. I had seen Relik fight, and he would be a tough fight for me. With his delve team backing him up, I was certain I had no chance. I decided to let him go and hoped he wouldn’t join the Sky King. “I can not match the offer at this time, Relik.”

“High Mage?” The Sky King addressed me with disdain. He turned to see the Mage Hunter nod to him, affirming I was the thorn in his side. “I was hoping to meet you. You have quite a bit to answer for yourself. I admit we did not plan for your presence. And your exchange spell—a brilliant move.” He sounded both praising and contemptuous in one. “I might have been able to use your skill, but you have pushed me too far, and you will not trouble me again.”

“That is Storme Harlight,” Baladon said from the group behind the Sky King.

The Sky King turned, annoyed at being interrupted, and Baladon flinched, “Do you have a problem if I change our terms? It is obvious that the High Mage here has done me quite a bit of harm, and your grudges can be addressed after I finish with him.” It was not a question by the Sky King. He was telling Baladon Bricio how it was.

Baladon retreated into the crowd, and I guessed he was not going to speak up again. The Sky King turned back and tossed the five coins in an arc toward Relik. Relik snatched all five in a lightning-quick motion. The Sky King hissed, “Now, take your delvers and go.”

I reached inside for my communication stone. I would need Bleiz, Cilia, and Leda to bring in the Maelstrom and get Freya to safety once the fighting starts. Maybe I could lure away more of the men in the fighting to give them a better chance. I was sure Pakkam would take the Sky Wraith and engage the Onyk Pegasus; he was smart enough to figure that out on his own. My planning was halted when Relik moved.

I was just as shocked as the Sky King when Relik let the five coins drop from his hand one at a time. Each one hit the packed earth with a thud. “I never said I would accept your offer, Sky King. I just wanted to see if you had the coin on you. It would make a nice bonus when we cause you to run away with the tail between your legs.”

Fury flashed in his eyes. “I never liked your kind,” the Sky King said tersely. “Since you mentioned my tail, I should also warn you about my bite!”

The Sky King swelled rapidly, and as he did so, his head elongated into a massive snake’s head and lunged at Relik. No, not a snake, a black dragon head. Relik batted the head aside with his sword as it was still getting bigger, black scales cracked from the forceful blow. “Marigold! Is this an actual dragon?”

Marigold was back peddling herself, trying to cast a spell, “Not an illusion!” She yelled a breath later.

I heard Jasper mutter, “Damn it, Relik, you should have taken the coins. Now we have to do some actual work!” Jasper had materialized a bow and slipped into some shadows.

I was not as confident or in the mood to joke around as the Sky King’s body kept growing. At least I knew how he had obtained the dungeon crystals and why he did not come below decks on the Sky King to handle me personally. His power was in the form of a monster.

That was not the only issue I was dealing with, as the Bricios were charging. One of them could not avoid the growing tail of the black dragon and was crushed. The Sky King did not care at all for his ally’s safety as he lunged with claws at Relik. A powerful aetheric shield halted its progress. Marigold’s illusion over the Sky Wraith disappeared, revealing the ship. Pakkam was on the deck and ordering it into the skies immediately.

The Wolfsguard in the Spire were rushing out to help with the Bricios. Relik was already kiting the dragon away from the Spire. The Sky King was smart enough to realize that Relik and his delve team were the biggest threat, and the black dragon followed him. I took my stone and yelled into it, “Bleiz, get them out of the Spire from the fourth-floor access.” That was all I had time to say as the Mage Hunter and Bricios reached me.

It was pure chaos, and I found someone at the rear of the Bricios and tried to exchange places with him. I was not overly surprised when my ability failed to activate. I threw lightning spheres into the crowd of men and women rushing us. I hoped it would give some advantage to the fighters. About half were activated, and the electric pulses slowed some of the men. My fight was going to be with Captain Abaddon and the Mage Hunter, as both signaled me out.

I was already pushing overdrive with lightning reflexes, and the Mage Hunter was already aware of my speed. I was surprised at Abaddon’s speed. He had a trickle of green dripping down his chin—a speed enhancement potion? Of course, I would not have an easy time with this. The dragon’s tail slammed hard into the ground, shaking the earth and causing some to stumble. It then roared into the skies as the aura of dragon fear rippled from it.

It affected both my Wolfsguard and the Bricios. The Dusk Hunters were not affected, and neither was I. My mental training and my aether fortress spell prevented me from having more than a feeling of anxiety wash over me quickly. Abaddon only stumbled for a moment before continuing to close on me. The Mage Hunter just smiled, like he had enjoyed the wave of fear.

Those affected by the fear were paralyzed. Some could stumble away, but most were rooted in place while they tried to contain their fright. About half the Wolfsguard remained unaffected and would take full advantage of the opportunity to remove those of the Bricios who were paralyzed. I had not studied dragon fear but knew it was temporary.

I first clashed blades with the Mage Hunter as he pressed me with his runic shield and blade. His overwhelming strength threw me back a few feet but did not knock me to the ground. Abaddon was using his ally to try to flank me. I heard a small roar and hiss as I caught a side glance at the entrance to the tower. Isla was holding a furious wrestling match with Kiara on the ground. The white phantom cat had tried to come to my aid, but someone held her leash inside the Spire, and Isla was trying to pin her down.

I spun and cast an arcane web over the mess of white fur and bodies, “Someone help Isla get Kiara inside!” I yelled. “And close the door!” I didn’t have time to worry about the cat’s safety as my own was in jeopardy.

The Mage Hunter circled me and forced me back to prevent getting flanked by Abaddon. I feinted at the Mage Hunter and engaged Abaddon. Even under the influence of a speed potion, he was no match for me. I secretly pulled a dagger from my dimensional closet, and when I was inside his guard, I deposited a dagger in his ribs. My artificed dagger caused his protective shield to flash as it passed through it and then his armor as well. I escaped retaliation as Abaddon elbowed air, and his backswing missed as well.

“Useless,” the Mage Hunter muttered as Abaddon tried to remove the dagger to heal. He couldn’t use another potion so soon after the haste potion, so I was curious how… Baladon was rushing to his brother’s side. The confusion of battle was made even more so by people not moving from the fear effect of the dragon.

The Black Dragon suddenly crashed into the Black Spire. I think it leaped up there to get higher ground on Relik. The black stone it was made of did not relent, but the shockwave caused most of the windows to shatter, causing a rain of glass around us. How had the Duskhunters put the massive creature on the defensive and remained unharmed? I had my own problems.

The copper hull of the Maelstrom was in the distance and approaching quickly. I swore as the dragon climbed the tower.

Flashes and fighting erupted behind the Spire, and I assumed the Duskhunters were also engaging the invisible men the Sky King had dropped off when he arrived. I turned to continue my own fight when I was suddenly thrown back fast and hard. I was sent tumbling dozens of feet from some type of kinetic blast. My natural defenses with the lightning reflexes spell saved me from real damage. Still, I healed as I prepared for another attack.

It was not hard to figure out that the Mage Hunter was not fighting alone. A short fat, bald man had come late from the Sky King’s ship—I think it was a dwarf mage. I assumed it was another of the Sky King’s lieutenants as he moved to support the Mage Hunter. Baladon was healing his brother, and I could not reach him to stop it. I cast a lighting spear, but Baladon had an aether shield flare to protect him. I did get Adanddon’s attention as he turned, and his spite and anger-filled gaze locked with my own.

When Abaddon healed, I was now facing the Bricio brothers, the Mage Hunter, and the dwarf mage. The Sky Wraith was in the air, turning fire its aether cannons on the black dragon. The dragon was aware and lunged at the skyship, its wings unfurling to close the distance in a bink. I was happy it was leaving the Spire but fretted for Pakkam and his crew.

It crashed into the skyship and ripped a large piece of the hull off in a smooth motion. Splintering wood rained down among the Bricios and Wolfsguard. I also realized the dragon was targeting the anti-gravity runes that made the skyship fly. The ship tilted, not from the dragon’s weight but the port series of runes being destroyed.

Black shadow arrows shot by Jasper sunk into the dragon as he wrought vengeance on the skyship. Just three slashes through the hull, and the dragon took to the air, rising above and heading toward the coppery ship approaching. The black dragon was targeting the Maelstrom next with its vengeance since it could not close with the Duskhunters.

I took my communication stone, “Run!! Cilia, Bleiz, Leda, just run!!” A smug Mage Hunter stepped toward me, and I tried to move to find my feet locked firmly in place. The dwarf mage was focused on me and was grinning madly as well. Baladon was forming a fireball in his hands and pouring aether into it, making it more powerful. The only good news was the handful of Wolfsguard had completely neutralized the Bricios.

I tried to use my invisibility spell since I was far enough away from the tower, but the spell failed to work. I muttered, “Guess we are going to have to do this the hard way.” I was actually just hoping the Duskhunters would come to help me, as their dragon had fled for the moment. Then I got more bad news. Fourteen dots appeared in the sky from the opposite direction of Titan’s Shield. This could only be more reinforcements for the Black Mauraders, as the skyship silhouettes were unfamiliar to me.

I tightened my grip on my falchion. One problem at a time, Storme.