Chapter 95

We had been given yellow armbands to denote what side we were on. It was like we were playing some sick war game. Aelyn walked next to me well back on the stream of men entering the Citadel. From my understanding, the Bricios had managed to send away most of the battleships on long patrols out of the range of communication stones for their three-day coup. They then attacked all the succession seats of the Torrents and Miadens in the city. The remaining seats turtled up in the Citadel. The Blackguard were sworn to protect everyone in the Citadel, so the remaining elements of the families sought their protection.

As we walked, Aelyn said she heard some of the Citadel Blackguard had betrayed their own and let the Bricios faux Wolfguard into the Citadel. The battle had been raging for hours within the Citadel walls. Skyholme was never going to be the same with the loss of the Blackguard. Even if they survived, they could never be trusted again. As we entered the southern gates, two Naval soldiers briefly questioned us before letting us in. The Citadel was a sprawling complex with towers, wings, courtyards, and a massive underground complex.

Aelyn paused at the stairs descending into the lower complex. “What?” I asked as we could hear faint sounds of fighting in the distance.

She looked at the dark, unguarded stairs, “My mother. Maybe they keep the prisoners here in a dungeon.” Her face looked hopeful. “I may never get another chance to free her.”

I paused and said unconvincingly, “If we win, I am sure they will free her.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” she pleaded.

I looked around, and we were the only ones in the corridor. I checked my internal clock; enough time had passed that I wouldn’t suffer adverse effects. I pulled out an aether potion from storage and drank it, “Ok, Aelyn, I’m in.”

We descended into the depths of the Citadel. The walls were the same clean white stone found in abundance in the upper city buildings. At the bottom of the first landing, we found our first bodies.  Three young men in Miaden colors were killed with bladed weapons.  The blood had congealed, so they had been dead for some time.  Aelyn walked past them into the hallway lit with aether lights.

After twenty minutes of wandering, passing dead bodies, and checking doors, a frustrated Aelyn said, “We need to find someone alive.  The complex down here is too big. We need to get directions.”

“What if they don’t want to tell us?”  I said skeptically.

Aelyn rolled her eyes at me, “I will read their mind.  This place is a maze; all we have found are storage rooms.”

A sound in the distance had us both pause and then rush toward it.  The dim aether lights flashed by as we went deeper into the Citadel’s underside.  Maybe this was not the best course of action.  The Blackguard supposedly resided under the Citadel.  We finally caught up to the sound, and it was three children wandering aimlessly and arguing with each other.  On questioning them, we learned they were Torrents and hiding down here.

They were unaware of the prison’s location but knew that criminals were secured somewhere down here. Aelyn’s hope grew at hearing there was a prison.  The children did point out the markings on the wall for us.  The symbols were left over from the avian race that once ruled Skyholme.  The symbols were used as navigation tools, indicating which direction to travel.  Aelyn decided to follow the symbol that meant crypt, according to the children.

A few hallways and stairs later, we ran into a Blackguard who was bleeding out.  He looked up at us with defeated eyes.  I asked, “Who attacked you?”

He considered me for a moment and shrugged, “The sullied.  The reborn cast-offs came to seek their vengeance.”  He laughed, and blood sputtered out his mouth.

Aelyn stood before the Wolfguard cautiously, “Where is the prison for the traitors?  Is it in the Citadel?”  She studied him, and I summoned a healing potion.  Aelyn’s eyes flashed to me.  “We need to follow this symbol,” he hand-slapped the wall indicating a different symbol than the one we had been following. She rushed off.  I carefully handed the Wolfguard the potion, and he took it wide-eyed, realizing he was not going to die today. I figured he was not one of the corrupted Blackguard if he had been fighting the faux Wolfguard.

Aelyn was moving furiously through the Citadel tunnels.  Two Wolfguard jumped her around a corner, and she was barely able to block them.  I activated overdrive and dispatched both of them.  They were wearing the Bricio colors and were extremely young, so these were the faux Wolfguard raised by the Bricios.  I healed the slash on Aelyn’s shoulder before we continued more cautiously.  Aelyn was determined to find her mother, and we finally entered a wide corridor with heavy doors at the end.  Two Blackguard and four faux Wolfguard were dead in front of the doors.

We approached cautiously and confirmed they were all dead.  Aelyn tried the door.  “It is locked, but I think this is the prison.  She must be on the other side.”  She started searching the Wolfguard for a key while I put my hand on the door.

“It is magically sealed, Aelyn.  I think I can open it with my *arcane lock* spell,” I told her while unraveling the aetheric weaves of another mage’s *arcane lock,* sealing the door shut.

When I finished, I pulled in the latch, and it released, and the heavy door swung outward silently.  We had to move the bodies to get into the hallway beyond.  Aelyn moved inside when we got it open enough for her to enter.  I had a bad premonition about what we might find.  I remembered Pomare Torrent had refused to release Niserie Imiduis, and he had a dark look on his face when he read the parchment.  I hurried to follow Aelyn.

The corridor was well-lit, and Aelyn was walking slowly and cautiously.   Further down the corridor were rows of heavy doors with small barred windows in each.  Aelyn cautiously approached the first and looked in.  Satisfied, she moved to the next and the next.  I moved to catch up with her and looked into the first room.  Black glossy stone lined the walls, and an old man in dirty rags leaned against the wall.  He looked up.

His face was shrunken and cracked with aged lines.  His blue eyes looked hollow.  I thought maybe I could clean a little of his filthy cell and tried to use my *cleanliness* spell.  There was an aether barrier at the door.  I tried to open the door, but it was not arcane locked.  A conventional key was required.  Aelyn was five doors down, and I moved to catch up.

“Aelyn, did you find any keys of the Wolfguard you searched?” I asked.

Distractedly she answered, “No, neither of the Backguard had anything but weapons.”

There was nothing I could do for the man. I could not convince Aelyn to abandon her quest now, either. I searched the tiny alcoves between the doors, looking for keys as Aelyn advanced. All I found were pitchers of water and dirty bowls.  The corridor seemed to turn in a slow curve, going on for quite a distance.

I was worried about what Aelyn’s reaction was going to be when none of the cells contained her mother.  After about 20 doors, she suddenly stopped and stared into one of the cells.  Did she find her mother or a corpse?  I walked next to Aelyn, who was shaking.  I looked inside.

Seated on a stone bench was Niserie Imiduis, Aelyn’s mother.  She was thin and had a blank look on her face while staring at the door.  Aelyn tried the door, but it required a key like the first one.  It didn’t take me long to figure the black stone in this cell also prevented magic from being used, and the lock resisted my metal shaping.  Aelyn started getting violent against the door and screaming to get her mother to acknowledge her.

“Back up, Aelyn.  Let me try my lightning spell,” I said while pulling her back.  I aimed my lightning spear at the wooden door, which flashed and burned an inch into the wood.  Aelyn looked disappointed, but I cast it again and again, slowly burning around the lock.  After twenty casts, the door actually started burning.  This was fine as it sped up the process.

My lightning spear was closer to a laser, but as my aether got low, I drank another restorative potion and continued.  With the door burning merrily, I put on a leather glove, grabbed the handle, and pulled it off, and it clattered to the floor.  Aelyn kicked the door open, and I held her back as I worked on the flames first. Once I gave her the all-clear, she ran to her mother.  Niserie was catatonic.  She didn’t respond to Aelyn’s hug.  “Aelyn, I’m sorry,” I said.  They had been reunited, but Aelyn’s mother was clearly broken.

I walked forward and put my hand on the elf woman, who no longer radiated beauty.  I found I couldn’t utilize my aether inside the cell, “Aelyn, let’s get her out of the cell.  I can’t check her while she is in here.”  In the hallway, I tried again to use my healing diagnostic on Niserie.  My magic was still blocked, and I traced it to the metal bracers that she was wearing.  The bracers were seamless.  I used my metal sense skill on them, and the runes inside them were extremely complex.  I found familiar locking runes and then used my metal shaping skill to cut the runes from the aether crystals powering them.  The bracer fell to the floor, and then I repeated the process on the other bracer. I picked up the bracers and deposited them in my dimensional closet.  I wanted to take the door lock on the floor as well. It was the first metal I had found that actually resisted my metal shaping skill. It was too hot to touch, and we probably didn’t have time to wait for it to cool.

I looked, and Niserie’s eyes were slowly clearing.  Aelyn was crying into her mother’s chest because she didn’t see the change.  Niserie’s arms came up, and hugged her daughter.  I looked up and down the hallway.  Now that we had found and freed her mother, we needed to get them to safety.  Both of them.  Maybe I was also a criminal for freeing a traitor—not that Skyholme had a shortage of traitors now.

Aelyn supported her mother as we made our exit from the cells.  We were not moving very fast.  I paused at a dead woman in Torrent colors, “Aelyn, put those robes on your mother and cover her ears.  We might be able to get out of the Citadel.  Maybe Broderick will shelter her at the *Gentle Tauren*.”  We started following a circular symbol at intersections, thinking it went to an exit.  As we advanced upward in the complex, we passed more dead bodies and more Wolfguard from both factions.

Aelyn’s mother was getting more and more coherent.  Those bracers must have blocked both magic and subdued a person’s mind.  I didn’t hear the whispers the two shared between them as I stayed a dozen paces ahead, constantly alert for danger.  We only rarely encountered a live person.  If they were injured, I handed them a healing potion; if they were mobile, they usually fled in fear when they saw us.  We finally exited into a familiar arena.

The large violet gem in the ceiling told me where we were.  We were in the chamber where I had fought and defeated Baladon.  The event that catalyzed this entire civil war.  It had probably only accelerated the inevitable as the Bricios had been accumulating and training the faux Wolfguard for years.

Niserie dropped to her knees, “These are portal runes.  We can escape to another portal. I know the pattern sequence for the city of Llorth,”  She was tracing the lines in the floor and then spoke in frustration, “The patterns won’t link and are blocked and won’t activate.”

“The stone in the ceiling prevents all teleportation,” I advised.  Aelyn and Niserie looked up at the violet crystal suspended from the ceiling with silvery chains hanging down to the four corners of the chamber.

Aelyn studied it for a moment, “Storme, can you cut it free?  Use your ability to cut the chains that power the blocking runes?”  Her face was pleading.  “Just cut the chains, and then my mother can portal away.” I paused and realized Aelyn said just her mother would portal away, and she planned to stay.

I nodded and climbed up the stands to reach one of the chains.  These chain links were coated in a layer of mithril and were worth a massive fortune.  The links had intricate runes on each one. I wanted to marvel at this masterpiece of artificing but didn’t have the time.  I decided it would be better to preserve as much of the chain as possible so the stone could be reactivated after disconnecting it from the runic network.  I didn’t want to remove one of Skyholme’s defenses. The best way to deactivate it would be to climb the chain to the stone and then cut the stone free.  That would keep the formation intact.  After Niserie teleported, I could re-establish the device’s function.

Climbing the chain was easy, and I reached the stone in no time.  The mithril chain I climbed was as thick as my wrist.  I reached the stone, studied how it connected, and lowered the chains and runes through the chamber.  I realized everything was connected.  The teleport and anti-teleport runes were interconnected.  There must be a way for the anti-teleport runes to be turned off to use the teleport runes.

I didn’t have time to figure it out, though, as an impatient Aelyn shouted, “Can you do it, Storme? They could arrive at any time!”

 I used my metal sense and found simple mithril prongs held the stone in place. I started to free the large tier 7 stone.  My metal shaping skill made quick work of mithril anchors.  All I needed to do was lift the stone.  It wouldn’t budge.  Maybe I could store it in my dimensional storage?  I tried and, no, not while it was still powering the runic formation.  Fifty feet above the arena floor, Aelyn and Niserie watched me anxiously, encouraging me to hurry.

I used my aether discs to get leverage and finally got the stone to move.  I popped out like a magnet being repelled and then plummeted to the ground.  I watched in horror as I thought it was going to shatter into a thousand pieces, but it just thudded into the floor.  I breathed a sigh of relief.  Now I just had to get down, get the stone, and put it back.  Niserie picked up the large stone with effort. I guessed it was extremely heavy by her effort.

“I will be down in a minute,”  I yelled.  Aelyn looked up at me.  Then Niserie looked up as well, and I read her face and suddenly felt a cold wave pass through me.

Niserie put her hand on Aelyn’s shoulder, and they both vanished. A brief bit of shock flashed on Aelyn’s face before they disappeared. She had said the city of Llorth—if she was telling the truth, that was where they went in the Sphere.

I was shocked for a good minute, hanging fifty feet in the air.  Well, shit.  They literally left me hanging.  My thoughts turned to how I could get out of this.  With the stone gone, Skyholme was vulnerable to teleportation.  I could leave the chains as they were or cut them and take them myself.  That way, maybe they would blame it on the Bricios, thinking they looted the chamber when they figured out they had lost.

My eyes met the figure of the image of the mage breaking the island.  Yep, that was me.  I had broken Skyholme.

Making a decision, I cut the four mithril chains, and they swung down to the floor from the chandelier.  I used my aether shield discs to descend, cut the other end of the chains, and stored them in my dimensional space.  If I was going to have to flee to the lowlands with my family a little extra mithril would be welcome.  I walked out of the chamber and went to find Gareth and Callem.