Chapter 156

I was trapped in the aether core room. The door was splintering, and I was standing invisible against the wall. The massive ship was slowly falling from the sky by the lightening feeling in my stomach. The backup runes connecting the two forward crystals were either poorly maintained or could not handle the volume of aether required to power the antigravity runes.

I smirked as I pushed the ship’s forward movement to its max. I had just wanted the ship not to crash into the city, but it was also draining the aether much faster from the two remaining aether crystals. I also knew the forward movement might help keep the massive ship in the air a little longer.

“Move!” An angry feminine voice barked. The door crumbled to dust from some spell I was unfamiliar with. It was either a rot spell or some type of rapid aging spell. The corridor beyond was packed with Black Mauraders. A woman in all black stood in the doorway. Her shiny black hair pulled back into a tight braid. She looked in disgust inside the room and at the headless elf and the trapped young metal mage.

She held up a stone to speak, “The four crystals are gone, Regus. He must have teleported off the ship.”

“Find him!! We don’t have control of the Sky King, and the remaining aether crystals are going to be drained in minutes.” The women turned off the stone as the man on the other end raged on.

She turned to the captured mage. “Do you know where he went?”

I knew I should have killed him. He could tell her that I was still in the room. Another mage walked in and was looking at the damage I had done to the runic panels as the woman used the cleanliness spell to remove all the arcane webbing. She also dispelled the privacy bubble around the trapped mage. I could tell she was a powerful mage with ease that she used her spells.

Dramorn fearfully shook his head negatively now that he was freed, and I relaxed my grip on my falchion. The woman and the nine warriors behind her looked competent and imposing, and I was not sure I could handle them all. Most likely, I would have exchanged with someone in the hallway and ran. The man who inspected the panels gave the woman bad news: “He wrecked the runic panels. It is gonna take days to fix this without him,” he pointed to the beheaded elf.

She gave a frustrated grunt and moved the stone to her lips, “Regus, the runes have been sabotaged as well. Clytus is dead. I suggest we abandon the Sky King before landfall.”

The screaming voice came back, “You were in charge of the ship’s security, Dellia!! This is all your fault!!” She once again put away the stone as the man named Regus raged through the stone.

“Get everyone to the skiff in bay four. There are two transport skiffs there. I think we will be finding alternate employment in the Mauraders after this,” the woman said neutrally. A large man with half-orc features nodded and rushed away.

The man inspecting the panels turned to Dellia, “Should we try and take what we can off the panels? There is a few thousand gold worth of mithril, platinum, and gold in here.”

Dellia seriously considered the suggestion but ended up denying her man, “No, if the Sky King came down here and found us ripping out his control room, then we might get blamed for this fiasco.”

A warrior in a metal breastplate in the doorway noted, “Are we going to join the attack on the city then?”

The woman pursed her lips and looked where I stood. My invisibility should be good enough to fool her. She seemed to focus on my eyes, and my sweaty hand tightened on my falchion. “No,” she finally said. “Secure the skiffs for now and get the others there as quickly as possible. Regus is not a forgiving person.” Her team started moving out, leaving just Dellia, Dramorn, and the man who had been inspecting the damage.

Dramorn made to move out of the room, but Dellia grabbed his arm, “Are you a metal mage?” She asked.

He gulped and nodded uncomfortably. Dellia turned to the other man, “Bring him to the skiff. We are taking this one with us.” The young mage protested but was forcibly marched out. Only the woman and I remained in the chamber. She turned and looked again at me, “If you are in here, mage, well-played.” She then abruptly turned and left the room.

Since she had looked directly at me, I assumed she had somehow sensed or seen through my invisibility. There were a lot of ways that she could have done so. I couldn’t believe she had not revealed me to her men and attacked. Maybe she decided losing a few men when the ship was already going down was not worth it. It appeared she was working for a man named Regus, who might also be the Sky King.

I stepped cautiously into the corridor, and at distant intersections, people were running madly. Panic was evident on the ship, and I moved forward and stepped into a supply room to take a look out of a porthole. We were not above the island, and the lowlands were still far below.

I kept moving to the fore of the ship, looking for the secondary runic chamber for the aether crystals. I was thinking if I could accelerate the Sky King’s descent, I might be able to thwart a successful attack on the capital. I was nearly run into three times by pirates running the corridors before finding a room guarded by two men on this mid-deck toward the bow. Both men wore runic breastplates, had long swords in their hands, and were on high alert.

Both men proudly displayed the Black Mauraders emblem on their chest, three circles inside a triangle. I entered a nearby door around the corner when no one was looking to think. The room looked to be a storage room for camping gear, tents, sleeping rolls, cooking kits, dry rations, and a number of other useful tools for adventuring—or dungeon delving. It had a tiny porthole for natural light, and I checked again to see where we were.

A black ship was directly outside the porthole, so I could not see anything beyond the flat black hull. I figured the ship must have been called on to help save as much as they could. I could hear voices on the upper decks talking about what was coming aboard. It also sounded like another ship on the other side of the Sky King was also being loaded. My little gambit had pulled three ships from over the capital—maybe more that I couldn’t see. I switched out my tight cloak for one that fits much better on my frame. I started working on making more flash-bang alarm marbles. This disrupted my invisibility, but the room seemed unimportant, so I was not expecting to be disturbed.

I pulled out my communication stone to find out how things were going. “Isla?” I asked, tapping the seventh icon.

Isla’s voice came back seconds later, rushing her response, “Storme? Where are you? They are attacking the city!”

“I know. I am on the large pirate ship, riding it to the lowlands,” I replied, adding a comedic tone.

Isla was silent for moments, “You are where? Are you the one that had it moved away from the city? I am on the fourth floor of the tower, watching the attack. The big ship moved away about thirty minutes ago, and four of the other ships followed. We guessed they were leaving to fight Skyholme Navy.”

“So it drew five ships away? Even better than I had hoped. How is the Spire? Is there any danger there?” my focus on my sister’s safety.

“One of the pirate skiffs landed near the dungeon. Nothing else came this way. The Duskhunters are guarding the entrances and this floor. Your phantom cats seem the most worried of anyone,” she chuckled weakly.

“The Maelstrom should be coming to get everyone out,” I stated. “Get everyone to Lloth and shelter there. I will find my way there as well.”

“What are you doing, Storme? Why are you on the pirate ship?” Isla pressed worriedly.

“Just causing some mischief,” I said, trying to make her not worry. I ended the communication and switched over to Bleiz, Leda, and Cilia. “How are things going in Hen’s Hollow?”

Bleiz responded immediately, “Communications came back, and when you didn’t answer…”

“I am fine,” I said calmly. “I was the one who disrupted their blackout communication array. Was Gareth successful? Are you ready to head back to the Spire with the Maelstrom?” I said quickly.

Leda came over the stone, “After Gareth brought Mera and Fera here, he went to the city to fight the pirates. Sammie and Namira went with him and his team.” I rubbed my head angrily.

“Why?” That was all I could ask. There was nothing in the city that needed our protection.

Bleiz answered irrelevantly, “Gareth wanted to play hero and turn the tide of the fight. We heard the pirates are more concerned with looting than securing the city right now. Gareth was sure he could help the people.” I rubbed my head. I was sure Gareth was doing this to help people and get attention and praise for his efforts.

“Cilia, take the Maelstrom with Bleiz and Talia and get the people at the Spire if the opportunity presents itself. I will continue to do what I can. Most of the attackers are in the city, and I expect the Skyholme navy to return any minute to fight and engage the ships over the capital.” The door opened as I was talking, and two men entered, unconcerned about my presence, as they rushed to pack things.

They were loud, and Leda asked, “Who is that?” The men looked up at me, suddenly realizing I was not doing anything and had a communication stone. I went into overdrive with lightning reflexes and killed both men as I cast a privacy spell to silence the room.

I talked into the stone, “I am busy and have to get going. Get them out of the Spire, then take both skyships to Lloth with the Duskhunters. Understood?” I waited for them to affirm before putting the communication stone away.

I reactivated my invisibility and entered the corridor, heading toward the two guards that stood in front of the door to the aether crystal chamber. I walked between the guards and tried to open the door. There was a weak arcane lock on the door. If I channeled aether outside my body, it would disrupt my invisibility. I studied the arcane lock, and it felt like it was also tied to alert someone if it was disabled.

I backed away from the door and the two guards. I moved to an intersection and tossed two of the flash-bang marbles down each of two different corridors. I was hoping the guards would investigate, but they remained at the door, and the ship became a hive of activity. Someone ran by, yelling that Dellia was stealing two skiffs. Another crew member was yelling that the runes had exploded and the ship was going down. Another crew member thought there was a battle on the upper decks. Just a lot of confusion.

I decided to make an attempt at the room. I moved to the guards and swung at the nearest one’s neck. I was thrown back down the corridor, slightly dazed, and started healing. The guard had some type of recoil shielding. My invisibility was broken; I was now a target. The door to the chamber opened, and two more guards rushed out. I turned and ran. They had expected me to try and get to the other two crystals. Or, more likely, they couldn’t afford to lose them and had defended them with their best fighters.

As I raced down the corridor, I healed myself and lashed out at the men and women as I passed. My flash-bang had already stirred the hornet’s nest. I recognized the skiff bay in which I had found the metal mage and entered it. The skiff he had been working on was still here, but there were also four men and a woman loading it with supplies. “We are under attack!” I yelled, entering the room. “Guard the hallway!”

I didn’t think that was going to work, but they all drew weapons and moved to the door. I raced to the barn doors and swung them open before moving to the skiff. “What are you doing?” one of the men asked from the corridor.

“Regus told me to get the skiff ready,” I bluffed.

“No one calls the Sky King Regus…” He started to say. I threw my last four flash-bang marbles at him. The group was dazed as I moved the skiff toward the exit. As I exited the massive ship, the Black Maurder ship that was alongside the Sky King was to my left. I dropped below all the ships below and looked up—the Sky King was flanked by two large black ships one on port, one on starboard, and a fourth was aft. The small skiff had good speed, as I guessed it was used to intercept targets for boarding. I had seen this type of craft before from pirate hunting, but this one was older and not well-maintained. It still had enough utility to get me where I wanted to go.

I swung left, and two other skiffs emerged packed with pirates from the other side of the Sky King. I thought they were going to come after me, but instead, they fell rapidly to the lowlands. I guessed the mage, Dellia, was abandoning the ship with her team. Aether cannons fired on the skiffs from the skyship behind the Sky King. That was slightly surprising, and I decided to remain close to the ship for the moment, hugging the underside of the hull and just peeking out the starboard side.

There appeared to be some communication issues, and the skyship stopped firing on the skiffs quickly, letting them go. Maybe they thought that had been me. I got my own bearings. We were a long way from the islands now. The islands were just pea-sized shapes high in the sky above. The Sky King was on its steady descent to the lowlands. I doubted I could escape if the four escort ships came after me. The one on the stern was dropping now, probably in an effort to locate me.

I moved under the Sky King and forward in an attempt to hide. Another ship dropped below the keel of the Sky King, and suddenly, a deck filled with Black Mauaders lit up my small ship’s aether shield with lightning, arrows, and small aether canons. I chose a minotaur on the far side of the deck that seemed to be directing the attack and exchanged with him when the aether shield started to fail on my small skiff. I turned around to see the skiff aether shield collapse, and two fireballs blow chunks off of it. The minotaur was sent flying, careening to the lowlands with pieces of the skiff.

I cast my invisibility spell before anyone noticed I was on board. Someone said, surprised, “Was that Barret?” Everyone turned around, looking where I was standing for the minotaur.

Another crew member said, “We were told the infiltrator can teleport. Search the ship, call the Sky King, and tell him we downed the skiff, but the interloper may have escaped. Tell the captain that Barret was…killed by the target.” There were a lot of discussions as no one seemed willing to inform the captain of the minotaur’s death.

I followed the poor man who had to tell the captain that the minotaur had been killed. This ship had no sails, and the bridge was in the bow with only forward viewing. I followed him through the door, and the captain was talking to the other captains nearby and the Sky King. “Sky King, the skiff has been destroyed. The target was killed,” he said confidently. The captain looked for affirmation from the man whom I had followed. He slowly shook his head no. “Tits on an ogre. I misspoke; the target got away.”

The angry voice of Regus came through the communication stone, “Why is he not dead?! Where is he?” The captain looked to the man I followed for help. He looked paralyzed and had not even told him yet the minotaur had been killed. If not an army of Black Mauraders had been invading Skyholme, I would have found this all humorous. Right now, I needed to find a way to return to the islands.

“We don’t know,” the captain finally told Regus, the Sky King.

An angry Sky King yelled, “Get your ship back up to help with the transfer! The Skyholme fleet is engaging, and we need to get back up there to help!”

I moved to the corner of the bridge to listen to the communications, surprised I had not been discovered yet. I couldn’t spend a lot of time here listening, but getting intelligence might help the fight. As I listened, I learned the attack was just as I had thought. They had used all the lesser skyships and pirates to attack the outer islands to draw away the skyships and men from the capital. They then teleported in to surprise raid the capital and hold the city.

I learned the Citadel of Skyhold had fallen to the pirates already, but they had not captured anyone in the Triumvirate. That was not surprising, as I knew Loriel had planned for such an event after the Bricio revolt. Most of the discussion was on how to deal with the Skyholme harbingers. They had a lot of knowledge from the Bricios, but they were still tougher than expected.

I heard a familiar voice then. It was Abaddon’s, I was sure of it, “They have more harbingers than they should have. They must have been building them non-stop. The greatest weakness is that they can only fight in the air for eight hours. They should be mostly drained from going to Titan’s Shield and back.” He sounded confident and condescending all at once.

The Sky King’s voice came over the stones, “You have not helped at all in this fight, Bricio. I want your three ships to land and join the ground assault.”

“That was not our agreement,” Abaddon said grateingly back.

“If you want to enjoy the islands again and be allowed on them, you will land your ships and send your men to fight,” the Sky King ordered angrily.

I could hear Baladon whispering to Abaddon. Finally, he agreed, “We will land at the Black Spire outside the city and secure the tower.”

The Sky King retorted, “That is where the ancient mage’s library is located?”

“Yes,” Abaddon said quickly.

“Fine, secure the library for me,” he said dismissively. I could hear a lot of people in the background advising the Sky King. The Sky King then said, “The infiltrator may be invisible and could be on any ship. One of the mages thinks he is using the exchange ability to bypass our teleportation blocks. He probably can not use it over a great distance. Have your mages cast invisibility disruption spells and find him!”

It looked like my tricks had been uncovered, and three harbingers were going to attack the Spire. I needed to get back to the Spire and help against the Bricios. A wave of aetheric magic washed over the bridge a few moments later. A shocked captain drew his sword and called for help. I had already cast a privacy screen as I met his blade with my own. The messenger had left, and we were the only two on the bridge as we crossed blades.

He was strong, fast, and an experienced swordsman. My speed kept him away from the door and from alerting his crew. I was able to cripple him, opening his thigh with a deep cut through the muscle. He tried to speak, but the privacy screen kept him silent. I had no pity for the captain, and forced him into a corner. I used lightning spear to surprise him and burn a hole in his shoulder, making it difficult for him to grip his weapon. I was surprised he did not have an ability or more artificied defensive items to fight with. His long blade was enchanted but not even remotely superior to my own blade.

I cast an arcane web on him to immobilize him further and then did a coup de grace on his head. I quickly cast an arcane lock on the door and started to figure out the controls. I think it was about time to reacquaint myself with the Bricios.