Chapter 157 The Mage Hunter

The skyship I was on was slightly unusual; its bridge was in the bow and had a one-hundred-eight-degree forward view, but I did not know of anything happening on the top deck behind me. From the design, it was not what I would consider a warship.

The controls were clearly labeled in a beautiful but unfamiliar script.  I cast my comprehend languages spell and quickly reviewed the controls. All the controls were easy to understand with translation. The aether crystals on this ship were at over eighty percent capacity. I surmised the large ship had been the ship that had portaled the rest of the fleet since its aether crystals had been almost drained.

I listened to the communication stone connected to the Maurader fleet’s other captains as I worked. They were relaying orders for the engagement over the capital.  The Navy had returned and was fighting, but the Mauraders were extremely coordinated in their efforts. They jointly targeted a threat, and soon, there was a confirmation that a Harbinger ship was being sent crashing outside the capital. I frowned as I listened and prepared myself.

My own ship was currently tethered to the massive Sky King while they rushed to transfer what they could salvage. I was also somewhat lucky in that the majority of the best fighters seemed to be in the capital city and not on board the skyships.

The harsh voice of Regus came through the stone, “Captain Nemius! Answer me!! Did you find the infiltrator on your ship!” I realized he had asked Captain Nemius many questions in the last handful of minutes, and he had not answered because he was dead at my feet.

I decided it was time to go. I needed to get back to the Spire and intercept the Bricios. I moved my hands across the controls. I ended up cutting aetheric power to the inertia sinks and cutting the bubble gravity on the ship. I had a number of pirates on board and did not want to have to fight them all. I tried to use the controls on the ship to move the ship and smiled. The bridge control station was locked for movement.

It only took me a moment to send out my metal sense skill to locate the runes responsible. It was an ingenious set of runes that keyed all the controls to one person, whom I assumed was the dead man on the floor. Fortunately, this was not a problem as I rewrote the runes and bypassed the lock. I tested the controls; the skyship lurched and tugged on the mooring lines. I deactivated the wind buffering next. The pirates on board were not in for a pleasant ride. There was screaming coming from the stone that I ignored.

With my overdrive lightning reflexes active, I braced myself in the captain’s chair and started my next surprise. I rolled the ship hard over. I was not concerned with damaging the ship. My goal was just to get my ship upside down and scrap the top decks together. As I rolled onto the Sky King’s deck, I could see pirates scrambling to get out of the way. The action had been too sudden, though and many of them were crushed. Aether shields flashed and were overwhelmed by the mass of the ship crushing them.

Regus, the Sky King, came over the communication stone, “He is on the Dark Passenger! The enemy is on the Dark Passenger! Remove it from the skies!” He was quick to figure that out. Well, at least I knew my ship’s name, The Dark Passenger. It must be a converted passenger liner, although I had no idea who had built it as I did not recognize the language on the controls.

The Dark Passenger tugged hard at the lines, and I was suspended upside down with my legs bracing me. I had thought the lines would snap, but they were holding. I needed to continue my role as I had hoped to roll across the top deck of the Sky King and into the ship on the port side before flying off. Spells targeted my ship, and smaller aether cannons fired on the bridge, shattering the windows. I was sprayed in glass, my own aether shield flashing weakly, protecting me.

I pressed the controls all the way to break the bindings. The ship jerked again, and a loud sound of breaking wood echoed through the bridge. It freed the Dark Passenger to roll across the large deck of the Sky King and into the other ship tied on the other side as planned. Unfortunately, the chair I was sitting in also broke loose from its floor mountings, and I was tossed with everything else on the bridge like I was inside a blender.

One of the reasons I activated the lightning reflexes was to avoid damage from being slammed around by the objects on the bridge. I kicked away from the chair and just needed to make sure I did not accidentally fall out of the shattered forward-view ports with a lot of other items from the bridge—including the communication stone still screaming away. I probably should have pocketed that. Fortunately, the ship on the other side of the Sky King had masts, which served to halt our roll momentarily.

My aether shield had been used up, but I was mostly unharmed as I picked myself up. I would be able to reset the aether shield in just a few seconds. My ship was on its side, and I could hear the masts of the other ship cracking under the pressure. I climbed the floor to reach the controls. I rolled the ship back ninety degrees, righting the ship, getting the floor in the correct orientation, and giving me some semblance of balance. The bridge was a mess of books, furniture, coins, and other objects.

I could hear the angry shouts of the pirates outside, and one appeared in the broken forward window and entered the bridge. I pressed the controls to send the ship straight up. The scarred older warrior stumbled as the increased gravity hit him, but he did not stop rushing me. I summoned my falchion from my dimensional space and blocked his strike. It was a heavy hit and numbed my arms.

The pirate grinned, seeing me struggle at his unnatural strength. It was probably an ability like Sammie’s focused strike. With the separation I gained, I cast an arcane web at him and frowned as it passed through him. This opponent had more than one trick. I asked, “Etheral form?” It was a tier three ability to make your body insubstantial for a moment.

He smirked, his scarred face making him look hideous, “No, boy, but good guess. I will let you know after I remove your legs and you stop running and giving the boss such a headache.”

He launched into a flurry of attacks. I had the edge in speed, but that did not mean he was slow as we danced on the bridge with the Dark Passenger shooting skyward. He fought with a bastard sword and shield and had decades of experience by his looks. I taunted him, “You know there is magic to remove scars. You don’t have to be so hideous.”

He didn’t like my joke and threw his shield at me, which I thought I was dodging until it changed direction and slammed into me. Knocking me hard into the wall. After striking me, the shield zipped back to his hand. He had a stupid smile on his face as I stood and healed at the same time.

“Nice trick,” I said, spitting a little blood. “Try this!” I cast a few lightning spheres and frowned as they all failed to detonate. He had something to counter tier-one magic. I tried arcane web again, and the web just dissolved a few feet from his body again.

“I am a mage hunter, little man,” he said with a smile, “and my scars can not be healed as they are curses from your ilk.”

I stepped back, not familiar with what a mage hunter was. Was he using an ability or an artifact to cancel my spells? The Dark Passenger shook as other ships struck it with aether cannons. I had not reset the ship’s aether shields after rolling it. The hull cracked with each successive strike. The damage the skyship was taking did not seem to worry my opponent. I sensed he would happily fight on while this skyship was destroyed around him.

Whatever his defenses were, they couldn’t counter my tier four spell of lightning reflexes. I asked you, “You can counter tier two spells? Can you counter tier three spells as well?” I asked inquisitively, getting a pause in the fight. I read his face as he showed some doubt. Maybe his defense only extended to tier-two spells. That meant my exchange ability, which was tier three, might work on him.

I tried to use the ability and got backlash after I lost the invested aether. The fighter smiled, “I don’t know what you just tried, but no magic works on me,” he chortled as he attacked. I tried using lightning spear during the next engagement, and it flared out before contacting his body. He had some type of ridiculous defense, and I could not keep up this fight much longer. Not only were the Bricios probably getting close to the tower, but the Dark Passenger was taking a lot of damage by the pursuing Maurader skyships.

My healing worked, and that was just tier-three magic, lesser restoration. So, I deduced he must have some type of nullifying aura around him, but it could not affect my person. He was a really difficult opponent, and I was glad for all the hours I had spent training with Callem and the other masters from the Academy. The door to the bridge suddenly thudded as someone tried to enter. I had used arcane lock on it, so it was going to be difficult to break down. I guessed some Mauraders had either boarded the ship, or a few survived me barrel-rolling the ship.

I ignored the distraction and focused on the mage hunter. He was an excellent swordsman, maybe even better than Callem. He was not in a hurry to finish me off, taking a disciplined approach. I created a flash-bang while we circled and tried it on the wall behind me, but it had no effect as I was fairly certain that it wouldn’t. The light and sound were laced with aether.

The banging on the door got louder as they tried to break it down. It was a heavy door, and we had time. I was going to have to win this fight with my sword skill. My lightning reflexes spell had increased all the way to level twenty-seven, but my next evolution was not until level twenty-nine, and I did not see that happening in this fight.

I tried to use my assess person ability on the mage hunter, and he just smirked as the aether washed over him. He had thought I had tried another spell. So he could sense when I used aether on him. Since it required almost no aether to use, I kept using it on him. If he could sense it, then maybe it was a distraction. We engaged again in an altercation of blades; this time, I took a cut on my forearm from the edge of his shield.

He finally said, “You are good, mage. But your time is up.” A black ship rose outside the shattered window. The deck had a dozen men on it. I frowned and then remembered that the inertia sinks were disabled. I held the terminal tight, stopped the skyship, and watched the mage hunter slam into the ceiling. My shoulder was wrenched out of its socket as I held on. The banging outside the door abruptly halted as well—and they had no ceiling out there to stop them from being launched into the air.

Before he could recover, I dashed toward him. Even with the force of the impact, he had enough awareness to roll away. I still managed to strike his boot, my falchion cutting deeply into the floor, taking his foot off at the ankle. He cursed, coming out of his roll as his stump was bleeding badly. Without hesitation, the mage hunter jumped out the broken window rather than fight me with a missing foot. I was not shocked as I assumed someone of his ability who fought on skyships probably had a number of ways to avoid dying from the fall.

I took the helm and turned the Dark Passenger hard. I found the mage hunter flying, rather slowly, toward the other black skyship. I thought about trying to ram him in mid-air. This ship could fly a little faster than two hundred and fifty miles an hour, and that should be able to kill him. But I decided to avoid risking engaging the skyship he was headed for. They were going to have to slow down to pick him up, giving me time to get back to the islands.

I oriented the Dark Passenger and found myself above the islands but still a distance away. I hated that this skyship did not allow the pilot to have an easy way to view aft. Aether cannons started to target me again from behind. I activated the aether shields and started to move the ship in a weave to avoid the fire.

The sharp movements were jarring without the inertia sinks, and the wind blowing through the busted windows was cold and intense. I used my thermostatic aura to minimize the effects as I raced back to the islands. I pulled out my communication stone and set up a privacy bubble to block out the howling wind, “Bleiz? Bleiz, have you rescued the people at the Spire?”

Bleiz’s voice came back, “We have not landed yet. There are too many Black Maurader skyships, and the Bricio Harbingers are near the Black Spire.”

“Have the Bricios landed anyone yet?” I asked with concern as my aether shield flashed and the Dark Passenger shook.

“They attempted to attack the barracks with aether cannons, but the Duskhunters established an aether shield over the building, according to Isla. The three Bricio Harbingers landed near the Duskhunter Guild Hall out near the dungeon. All the Duskhunters are in the Spire, so no one was defending the Guild Hall,” Bleiz relayed. I owed Relik for following through on defending the Spire, and protecting my sister and friends.

“Where is the Maelstrom?” I asked, concerned.

“We are thirty miles south of Skyhold, about three miles over the island. The fight is getting fierce over the city—but I think we are losing,” Bleiz said heavily. “Only one of the enemy ships has been downed, and from what we have seen, the Skyholme Navy has lost two Harbingers and a Wasp. But only part of the Skyholme fleet came back from the assault on Aegis City.”

I was close enough to see the dots in the distance. Right now, they looked like flies swarming over a smoking corpse. The city was burning, and large portions of the city looked destroyed. The Black Mauraders had done so much damage in such a short time. It was more damage than the Sadians had ever done in any of their attacks.

Four Black Maurader ships left the formation over the city and started to vector up to intercept the Dark Passenger. The Sky King was trying to make sure I would not escape again. I guessed I had really angered him. There was no saving his massive skyship. If I got out of this mess, I might search the wreckage for those other two other synched aether crystals.

The four ships created a hole in the defense formation, and the Skyholme ships pressed the weakness. At least my presence was helping the Navy. I thought about ramming the Dark Passenger into a Black Maurader skyship but instead thought revenge against the Bricios would be better and might give the Maelstrom a chance to rescue those in the Spire.

I cycled aether to the cannons on the Dark Passneger but found they could not be fired from the bridge. I could only control the recharging from the aether cannons from the bridge. That was disappointing, but I would probably not hit anything anyway.

With one skyship behind me and four in front, I funneled as much aether to the shields as possible. I moved in a corkscrew evasive pattern, which worked momentarily. The onrushing skyships fired a dizzying array of varying shots. The aether shields failed quickly, and the ship shook heavily from repeated strikes, but it was over as I zipped through their formation. Now, all five ships were behind me.

The aether shield would not cycle back up, so the damage must have damaged the runes. The Dark Passenger also had lost some maneuvering and jolted in course changes. Another Black Maurader ship peeled off from defense to attack me. It was almost humorous, all these pirates interested in just me. If they remained focused on their task at hand, I would not be able to stop them.

My target was the Black Spire and the dungeon. I searched for the Bricios Harbingers as I rapidly approached the forest near the dungeon. There, they had landed one Harbinger inside the walls of the Duskhunters Guild Hall. The other two Harbingers landed in a small pond a short distance away. They were close enough together that I might be able to hit both of them with on crashing. The Harbinger inside the walls was starting to rise. That made my choice easy.

My approach felt painfully slow from a distance, but as I closed, the pond grew rapidly in my vision, and it felt like I had no time to react. I felt the ship was lined up as best I could and leaped out of the skyship, invisible. I was a few hundred feet above the ground. I hoped my feather fall ring worked as the ground rushed toward me.

On its final flight, the Dark Passenger clipped the first Harbinger, doing minimal damage, but slammed solidly into the second. I only saw part of the crash as I fell rapidly to the ground below the trees. My descent slowed rapidly about twenty feet above the ground, and I landed softly between two large oak trees. Now, it was time to find Abaddon and Baladon.

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