Chapter 128

As I told Bleiz what had happened in his absence, he was shocked, “They just gave you the entire Black Spire?”

I shrugged, “I am more the caretaker for the Spire.  If I leave Skyholme, they will take ownership back, and it will not pass to my descendants.  The Triumvirate is mostly using it as a bargaining chip for my assistance in building and maintaining their skyship fleet.  They are bankrupt and need my metal shaping skill.”

“And you have a refuge for Wolfsguard on your land?  They allowed that?”  Bleiz was sitting in disbelief at the news.

“The Wolfsguard who were working the orchards were maimed or considered too old to continue in their duties.  I have started the process of healing them.  After the Bricios fractured from Skyholme, indentured contracts were abolished and extended to the Wolfsguard. I think the Triumvirate thought their loyalty bond would keep them in the service of the islands.  After talking with the Wolfsguard I have found their loyalty is flexible,” I explained my thoughts.

I dropped the bombshell on him, “I have an entire day’s unfettered access to the Progenitor Dungeon as well.  I have offered the Wolfsguard the opportunity to have children.”  I could not read his face as it went through an array of emotions.  He obviously knew what the dungeon represented.

He seemed uncomfortable, “Have any of the Wolfsguard committed to accepting this offer?”

“It is all voluntary and, yes, they have.  About thirty couples, according to Jaesmin.  She is one of the wolfkin mothers who choose to remain in Skyholme to raise the Wolfsguard children.”  Seeing Bleiz struggling, I asked, “How do you feel about all of this?  The offer is also open to you—you need to find a partner, though, maybe Lorae,” I joked.

Bleiz did not like my joke, “The elf girl is twice my age and a half as mature.”  He gathered himself, “I am not sure how I feel, Storme.”  He stood and left the cats.  “I need some time to think,” he said, leaving me.  I was in shock as I thought Bleiz would be happy at the prospect of the Wolfsguard growing their population.  They would die out without my offer.

I went to the bridge, the cats following.  Leda was in the pilot’s chair, bouncing a rubber ball off the forward one-way viewing screen.  “Storme!”  She stood.  “Cilia is sleeping.  What is the plan?”

I checked the gauge, “Looks like about fourteen hours left for the aether crystals to recharge enough to fly back.  The trip was a partial success.  We did not get the coin to buy a new aether crystal to power the Maelstrom.  But I did get new maps for forty-nine regions.”

I pulled out all the maps, which were tightly rolled inside individual tubes.  Leda was immediately excited and began to figure out the markings on the tubes for which region was where.  I worked with her on her navigation desk to understand the system myself.  The maps were just under three feet to each side.  The edge of the map overlapped with the adjacent map.  She was having a blast as the maps were more detailed than most of our maps.  Comparing it to one of our current maps, it had variations in the settlements, and my new maps had icons for ruins and dungeons.  The dungeons even had their names and two numbers, which identified how many levels they had and the relative difficulty.

Celia came into the bridge as we had four maps spread on the desk.  “What are you working on?” she asked interested.

Leda excitedly said, “Storme got new maps, and they are fantastic.  They have so much more information, and are much more recent.”  Cilia joined us as we figured out the maps.  It was disheartening to see Skyholme was nothing more than a small black dot with a faint green dotted line indicating its orbit over the lowlands.  Each map section was packed with details.  The backside of the map had even more information as it was a topographical and terrain map and noted only access points for entrance into the Underearth.

After we spent an hour, I pulled out all the pirate bounties I had copied, “These are the pirate bounties near Llorth.  At least the easiest ones, which are just gold-ranked difficulty.   I am going to let you two sort through them and identify their hunting grounds on the new maps.  We must identify one target we can handle from this stack.”  Cilia took the stack enthusiastically.

“When are we going after them?”  Cilia asked, paging through quickly.

”I think next seventh day.  One week to prepare, and we will go to their stomping grounds to do some reconnaissance.  We probably will not engage unless I think it is a definite victory.  But we will return the next week prepared,” I gave them my simplified plan.  I needed a functional skyship to keep Loriel away from the Black Spire.  I let them work together to continue reviewing the maps and pirate bounties.

I decided to move into the city for some shopping.  As I walked down the ramp, Bleiz appeared next to me, dropping his invisibility.  “I agree, Storme.  Giving my people something to latch onto is good.  I am worried that the bonding to another in our nature will just eventually force us to serve others again.”

“Not if that bond is with your mate as it was intended,” I said quickly as we walked. This got him thinking for a long while.

Bleiz was lost in his thoughts when a rushing Lorae found us in the open market. Bleiz rolled his eyes and asked, “How did you find us?”

Lorae smiled and held up the comm stone from the set I had loaned her, “It has a directional beacon on it. You just hold down the number, and it gets brighter as it points to the desired stone.”

“Since Bleiz is coming back with, I will take that communication stone back,” I had out my hand, and she seemed reluctant to part with it, but the dark elf placed it in my hand, and I sent it to my storage.

Lorae asked, “So what are we shopping for, and why did you not call me for my services?”

“I am just looking for cooking ingredients,” as we were in the open-air market. Lorae seemed disappointed but still trailed behind us as I wandered the stalls and asked endless questions about produce. I asked where it was harvested, the cost, and to try a sample. Many of the fruits were familiar or had a familiar taste. I bought various bags to experiment with later. About half of the meat and produce was sourced from dungeons.

Lorae helped me find a source of chocolate in the market. It was, of course, sourced from a dungeon and processed in the city. It was much cheaper than Skyholme, and I had five hundred pounds sent to the Maelstrom. I also found a variety of coffee beans. All of the varieties were dry-roasted after being harvested from a dungeon. I got samples of each to try later.

We eventually returned to the Maelstrom, and I was fairly certain Lorae was infatuated with Bleiz. She must have touched and petted his arm two dozen times during the shipping. She returned with us to the ship because she wanted to play with Adrial and Kiara. I think she was just trying to spend more time with Bleiz, and I thought maybe Relik was trying to keep Bleiz in Llorth for Lorae.

Lorae did not stay long as her father commed her and asked her to come home. I was going to get some rest, but Cilia and Leda wanted to talk further about the pirate bounties. I went to the bridge and found the left wall had six of the new maps tacked to it, a two-by-three grid. Leda flushed slightly, “Storme, I hope you don’t mind, but I went and had all the maps coated with resin to make them into panels.”

I looked, and leaning against the wall were the other forty-three panels also in clear resin. Cilia volunteered, “It makes it easier to view and switch them out. We are going to ask Rippon to shape some wood to hold the map panels in place. We can get six panels, two by three, on both walls.”

I walked over and checked the resined maps. They were stiff and semi-glossy. Both sides had received a coat, “No, this is good. Nice work. You wanted to discuss the pirates?”

Cilia said, “We went through the bounties and started by eliminating those we thought would be too difficult. That left nine. Of those nine, two seemed to be inactive, with no activity in the last three months. The remaining seven were sorted by distance from Skyholme. She indicated the map panels they had put up.”

I walked to the wall and noticed yellow dots. I touched one, and it came off. Leda rushed over and again applied the mark, “The resin protects the map, and these markers are temporary. I got yellow, pink, and light blue to contrast with the maps.”

Cilia offered, “This is how they trained us in the Naval Academy to chart courses in the Sphere. The markers make tracking our progress easier.”

Leda added, holding up the three markers, “These make everything so much easier. So far, I have been referencing landmarks and terrain on our maps. It works as long as we get on the correct heading, but we could get seriously lost if I make an error. I wanted to ask if you could buy another set of maps, though.”

I coughed loudly, choking during my swallow. “Another set? This set was twenty-five hundred gold!”

Leda winced when I mentioned the cost, “It is just that I would like one wall to be the topographical terrain maps and the other wall to be the landmarks and civilizations. In other words, the backside of the maps. Having both out at the same time saves time…”

“Not at this time. You will have to make do with turning the panels over,” I advised. “What have you learned about the seven remaining pirates?”

Leda looked a little deflated, and Cilia continued at the panels, “These yellow dots are them. These two are the farthest away, and I think they operate small, fast ships by the description in the bounties.”

“I do not want to pursue any pirate that might be faster than the Maelstrom,” I replied.

“I doubt they are faster than us, but are just faster than the merchant ships they pursued,” Cilia said, handing me the two bounty sheets.

Cilia continued, “The remaining five targets are active along this mountain range. It runs about fifty thousand miles,” Celia started pointing out the dots. “You can see these five cities on this side of the range and these three on the other side. I assume there is a fair amount of travel between them due to their size, so many merchant skyships pass over the range.”

She handed me the five bounty sheets, “Are any of these pirates working together?”

Celia pulled two from my hand, “I think these two are the same pirate. I am guessing he has two ships. The description of the captain is the same. Tall black-furred minotaur with ice magic.”

“So, which of these five would you choose?” I asked.

Cilia pulled one immediately, “This one. Just because she always targets small, slow targets. She has two small skyships that she launches from her much larger ship.” I focused and read the sheet.

The pirate captain was a female human called Maggie the Siren. Her ship was a large trader called The Night Jewel. The real threat was the two fast skiffs she used to attack her selected targets. The reward for the capture of the captain and ship was one hundred thousand gold and two pips on my Adventurer’s Card. There was an additional reward if some of the cargo was returned. Seven ships had been taken in the last year by this pirate. That meant she was good, and the estimate had her with about one hundred crew.

Maggie sold captured crew and passengers as well as their ships at the same port city, Cinderfort. Cinderfort was a goblin city with access to the Underearth. It was not on any of the maps I had purchased. “I think this target is the best bet of the bunch. She only attacks small ships, so the Maelstrom should be able to draw her in. The threat is really just the two skiffs.”

Cilia pointed at the map, “She is operating along this one thousand-mile stretch of the mountains. It looks like she attacks every month or so. My guess is that is how long it takes her to sell the captured ship and prisoners in the goblin city.”

“Let us focus on this one. We have a few hours before the aether crystal recharges. Why don’t the two of you go get your Adventurer’s Card and find out as much as you can about this pirate,” I produced two large gold coins to pay for their copper cards. “I am going to be in my cabin and getting some rest.”

In my cabin, I spent some time studying the comprehend languages spell, and then I used most of my aether to make platinum coins. Twelve platinum coins were added to my dimensional space. Now that I was not focused on crafting swords, I could store up some platinum coins again. It was still going to be more time-effective and profitable to make enchanted weapons rather than coins. With the amount of aether I had just spent on creating the platinum, I could have made enough mithril to inscribe runes on four long swords.

I set my privacy and alarms and fell asleep with the cats curled up around my legs.

My alarms went off as Bleiz knocked on my door a few hours later. “Storme, Cilia, and Leda have returned from the Adventurer’s Hall.”

I met them on the bridge, and Bleiz came with me. Both Leda and Cilia were clearly intoxicated so I used my neutralize poison on both of them. “What did you find out about the pirate Maggie the Siren?”

Leda answered, “You should ask if we want to be cured of our intoxication next time, Storme. We spent good coin on those drinks!” It was mock anger and Leda being Leda.

Cilia shook her head, “We didn’t pay for any drinks. A friendly adventuring team bought them for us. As to our pirate, she actually has a terrible voice but loves to sing. We found a few names of people in her crew that have separate bounties. All are silver-ranked bounties.”

Cilia handed me four bounty sheets that I looked over. Elsdon’ The Bull’ Jaymes, Bramwell ‘Deceiver’ Padley, Burr ‘The Mad’ Payne, and Alyson. Bounties of 500 gold, 500 gold, 300 gold, and 250 gold, respectively. They needed to be turned into an Adventurer’s Guild, or proof of death was their head. “A bit grizzly hunting people for gold,” I said, looking at the sheets.

Cilia had no reservations, “Look at their crimes. Rape, murder, theft, slavers. Removing these people is a service.” I had not seen her this passionate before.

“The plan is to just scout it out. Looking at this, these people have impressive abilities and some serious spellcraft. Lightning. Concussive strikes. Firewalls. Aether shields. I do not know if we are actually going to try to take them. I am going to work on aether cannons for the Maelstrom this week. We will see.”

We spent an hour discussing the pirate ship and the crew we managed to be linked to. I was already having second thoughts. I used the small kitchen on board to make a sweet and savory vegetable stew. Shortly after eating, the Maelstrom was headed back to Skyholme.

The entire trip back, I was schooled in skyship tactics by Cilia and Leda. Cilia had a much better grasp of the three-dimensional tactics. My biggest concerns were enemy aether cannons. Personal spell magic rarely had an effective range past three hundred feet. Aether cannons, while difficult to aim, could reach a mile or more.

If I decided to forgo the pirate hunting, then I needed to find another way to procure a ship. It had seemed like a good plan at the time. We landed at the Shiny Platinum late on the seventh day. Deadlines were quickly coming together. Skyholme opening for trade and my requirement to staff the Black Spire with a skyship and guards. One thing that kept drawing me back the pirate bounty for Maggie the Siren…one hundred thousand gold…