Chapter 133 Privateering

I was on the bridge with Cilia and Leda as they moved off the island.  Leda was working with the new maps. She had a ruler and her temporary markers.  She had some lines already on the map in yellow and was now adding a blue line after confirming our heading.  She confirmed speed and then turned to me, “Elven hours, fifty-three minutes, and then we will circle here,” she indicated on the map an area marker as being known for recent pirate activity.

“What type of attack can we expect?”  I asked.

Leda looked at Cilia, who nodded.  Leda explained, “Most likely, they will not have any invisibility on their large ship, The Night Jewel.  So we will see that large ship rising from the mountains.  We plan to maintain an altitude of ten miles.  They will have to close before launching their skiffs.  They do not have invisibility enchantments on their skiffs from the bounty sheets either, but that is a common practice for pirates.  Distract you with ships and then get an invisible ship close enough to board.”

“Even if they are invisible, though, our aether radar will pick them up, correct?”  I tapped our radar, which had been fairly expensive, and warned us against large flying creatures.

“It should, but nothing is guaranteed, Storme,” Cilia said, turning her head from the captain’s chair.  “These are pirates.  I doubt they play by fair rules.”

Cilia locked in the course and left the chair.  “If we do engage, the trouble is going to be getting our fighters to their ship.  The best plan we had was landing the Maelstrom on their deck.  That has risks, but we have twenty fighters on board.  We are still hoping they would load their best fighters on the skiffs and leave the main ship undefended. Then we just need to neutralize the skiffs.”

“And I have not yet added an aether cannon to the Maelstrom.  I have some ideas but am still working the math out,” I said.  The truth was I had designed an aether cannon, but it required adamantine to build.  I had too many financial obligations to spend my aether creating the rare metal.  “If we are going to talk tactics, let me get Pakkam.”

I went and brought back Talia, Pakkam, Bleiz, and Neoma.  Pakkam and Neoma were each going to have five Wolfsguard in combat units.  They were my experienced skyship fighters.  Talia was responsible for the seven delve team members on board.  And finally, there was Bleiz.  His job was to keep me alive.

Pakkam and Neoma had been in skyship battles before. The standard practice was to focus on eliminating the biggest threat, usually a mage.  Talia’s delve team would be support and defending the Maelstrom.  I realized we were talking like we would be fighting pirates today.  I paused their excitement, “We are just going to scout the mountains and gain some familiarity with the area.”

Cilia questioned, “But if the opportunity presents itself, we will attack?” Cilia was eager to experience skyship combat and had wanted to be a skyship captain since she was little. It was why she had joined the Skyholme Naval Academy.

“It would have to be very favorable for us,” I noted, deflecting the question.  We discussed tactics for two hours, and then I retreated to my cabin.  I was going to make as many feather fall rings as I could.  The idea of fighting on a sky ship and falling overboard was frightening, especially miles above the ground.

As I worked on the rings, I figured I probably could have done more than just equip my team with top-tier enchanted weapons.  Artificing with my shape metal skill was my strongest trump card.  That and being able to create the metal I needed to do the artificing.  I finished three rings in four hours.  The amount of focus for the fine runic work was very taxing mentally.  I knew these rings were going to myself, Bleiz, and Talia.  After a few hours of sleep, I would make a few more.  I took care of the cats, cleaning and feeding them before settling down for a four-hour nap.

I woke up with my absolute time spell alarm going off and checked on everyone.  The Wolfguard and most of the delve team were in the cargo hold, napping or playing dice.  Leda was in the captain’s chair, and Cilia was sleeping in their shared cabin.  Bleiz was in the aether crystal room.  He woke when I opened the door.  I gave him a ring, told him how to activate it, and then let him get some more rest.

We were planning to circle for six hours before heading back to Skyholme.  That would be three loops at a lower speed.  We would need to land to recharge our aether crystal partway back to the islands.  I made three more rings before I quit the taxing work.  I needed to be focused.  I handed out the four remaining rings to Talia, Leda, Cilia, and Pakkam.  I decided on Pakkam because he was the most skilled fighter among the crew. The ring enchantment was powerful enough to grab onto another person and still activate the effect.  My beast collars for the cats had the same effect artificed into them—a slow fall enchantment.

I went and sat on the bridge with Leda and took over the captain’s chair.  We were two hours from the start of our loop.  Leda went to get some rest, and I was alone.  I kept checking the radar for threats and watched the land racing below.  I could see the massive mountains approaching in the distance as well, our destination.  As the Maelstrom approached, I could see flashes in the sky.  I took out my telescope, and there were skyships in combat thirty or so miles away!  Had we found our pirate target this easily?

I slowed our approach and activated the ‘all hands’ bell.  Soon, Leda and Cilia were on the bridge with me, and Bleiz and Pakkam joined us.  Cilia had a better telescope and was using it.  Cilia asked, “Is it The Night Jewel?”

Leda was irritated, “Still too far away.  But possibly, the black dot to the left is our target.  The flashes are definitely combat—fire explosions by the looks of it.”

“Bring us wide left.  Let us stay out of the way and identify the black dot first,” I ordered.  This was the best possible scenario if these were our targets.  The large black dot was really far from the combat, so if the two sides were fighting another ship, then it would be hard to disengage and return to their carrier ship,

The Maelstrom swung wide like we planned not to get involved.  A few minutes later, Leda confirmed, “The silhouette matches The Night Jewel.  It looks like the skiffs are still harassing the other skyship.  They have not boarded yet.”  She handed me her telescope, and it looked like two flies swarming a single ship.  The large ship they were assaulting was the one that was casting fireballs.  The skiffs had shields that brushed off the attacks.

Cilia asked, “What do you want to do, Storme?”

I looked at the situation.  And estimated distances.  I finally said, “Stay wide and pass The Night Jewel to the left.  They are following the combat and are much slower.  We will go invisible and then accelerate back and land on the deck of The Night Jewel.  Hopefully, they will not consider our small ship a threat and ignore us.”

As we swept wide right, Leda gave us updates on the fight.  The ship they were attacking looked to be a medium merchant.  It had that same look like a ship pulled out of the ocean and flung into the skies.  These ships were popular in the sphere as you could use a much smaller aether crystal to power them and rely more on the natural wind currents.  It allowed for a larger mass, but they were much slower and required a lot more skill to fly.  The two skiffs were racing alongside and trying to drain the defenses of the merchant.

The merchant was not completely defenseless as they were throwing fireballs from mid-deck and stern at the skiffs. These attacks were coming from either an aether cannon, mage, or smaller artificed device.  They kept the skiffs at bay.  Leda commented, “They must have been at this for hours if the fight started in the mountains.”

Pakkam asked, “When we land on the large black ship, I assume you want no prisoners?”  I nodded slowly and found another shortcoming of my plan.  I could have artificed restraints to block a person’s access to their aether core. Now, the only safe course was to kill everyone and not take any risks.

“No prisoners, even if they surrender,” I affirmed.  Pirates were pirates.

We had passed the pirate ship, and I turned on our invisibility camouflage.  I spun the ship around and realized Cilia would have been the better pilot for this action.  I moved from the seat, and she eagerly took the seat.  Our approach from the rear did not go unnoticed by the pirates.  Small aether cannons fired in our direction on our approach. Brilliant lines of blue energy passed around us. Cilia activated our aether shields.  My own heart started racing.  We had been flying for a long time to reach the mountains and now had activated two aether intense devices.

The gauge to show how much aether our dual-crystals had was crude, like a thermometer.  It was at maybe twenty percent and visibly dropping.  Leda answered my question, “Cilia, we have thirty minutes of power left!  You either need to land on the ship or on the ground!”

Cilia nodded, “I will get us on the ship.”  Pakkam left the bridge to get his teams ready to go in the cargo hold.

I addressed Bleiz, “When we get close enough, I am going to exchange places with someone on their deck.  Kill them here before joining Pakkam.”

Leda, who had been focusing on the approaching monstrous ship, attention was drawn to me, “You are going to do what?”  She was already drawing her blade, though.  We had discussed this in our tactics meeting, but bringing an enemy to the bridge had not been part of the discussion.

“You can handle it.  Keep the cats locked in my cabin. Cilia, try not to land the Maelstrom on my head,” I grinned at the others and focused through the one-way viewing glass.

My exchange ability used aether based on how much distance the target was.  Under a hundred yards, and the aether was minimal; further, it increased rapidly.  The best part about the exchange ability was there was very little anyone could do to resist it. The deck of The Night Jewel came into focus, and I could see dozens of pirates on the long exposed deck.

I just hoped their best fighters were on the skiffs.  “I am exchanging with that…orc…on the stern,” I announced.  He looked to be a regular pirate, trying to work the small aether cannon firing blindly at us.  I brought out my falchion, activated my aether shield, coating my body, activated my lightning reflexes to overdrive, and finally activated my exchange ability after giving a nod to Bleiz, who was ready to receive the orc.

I was instantly on the deck of the ship and oriented myself.  The nearest pirate was a middle-aged human who looked confused for just a moment before reaching for a sword.  I did not give him time as my falchion separated the head from his body. I was on the stern of the black ship and was surprised at how large it was now that I was here.

The wood of the decking was a flat black. There was a strong breeze as well, and my hair whipped in the wind. I should have realized sailing skyships like this made less use of environmental bubbles to utilize the wind. The stern deck was elevated, and below, amid the masts and rigging, over twenty pirates moved about directed by a tall, thin elf.

Four pirates in mismatched clothes were rushing up to meet me. My aether shield suddenly flared as an aether bolt from a mage below struck it. I needed to keep moving and not gawk. I moved right and started casting arcane web. Although I was able to move fast, the time it took to form the spells was the same. So, after casting three arcane webs on the deck below, I had pirates on top of me.

An orc, two human men, and either a runt or maybe a goblin. My falchion cut through the blade of the eager human and straight into his torso. His shocked look ended as I kicked him hard toward his companions. The ship shuddered as the Maelstrom landed mid-deck, crushing a few pirates and throwing the entire ship into a frenzy as the camouflage ended. The added weight when Cilia cut power to the runes suddenly had the massive Night Jewel dropping out of the sky. My stomach felt the reduced gravity.

The Wolfsguard were now on the deck, and I focused on my opponents. They lacked real skill with the blade. The orc received a piercing strike through his mouth as I spun away and engaged the other human. He looked less enthusiastic after assessing his chances and turned to flee. I cast lightning spear at the back of his head, burning a hole through his spine, and his body collapsed to the deck.

The small goblin had planned to attack me while I was engaged but was suddenly alone in his fight. He dropped his two long daggers to surrender, but I just bisected his torso. The stern being clear, I looked below to see the brothers, Hadrian and Cesar, and Sammie holding a line at the bottom of the ramp from the Maelstrom. Delphia was at Talia’s side while she cast the ice lance spell.

The red-haired Namira was engaged with a pirate toward the bow, and the Wolfsguard were fighting in two and threes, quickly overcoming opponents. Bleiz appeared at my side, “Things seem to be going well.”

“I am going to send switch with Namira. She is fighting alone and recklessly,” I said, and before Bleiz could object, I exchanged with Namira and was in front of a dark-skinned woman. She had a buckler and a long sword, she and blinked at the new opponent. Her white teeth turned into a snarl as she attacked me. I parried her blade with my speed and then cut off both her arms in a slash from her flank. Her skin did flash, but whatever magic she had was not enough to stop my enchanted weapon. I did not let her shock settle in before beheading her.

I spun to see what was happening. The Wolfsguard had torn through the pirates, and Zinnia was healing Cesar. I looked over the carnage, and no one was alive on deck. Pakkam was sending his Wolfsguard below decks to clear them, and Talia was guarding the entrances. I felt the ship still falling as no one had compensated for the added mass of the Maelstrom yet.

Bleiz and Namira came to me, and Namira was angry, and so was Bleiz, “Why do you do that! I had her!”

I barked at the fiery redhead, “You run off from the group like that and endanger everyone. Bleiz, use your necklace and help them clear the decks below.” Bleiz nodded but was not happy.

Leda was off the ship and looking at the bodies with bounty posters in hand. She quickly inventoried the bloody mess, “Maggie the Siren is not here.” I looked at the fight in the distance. Leda held up her spyglass, “They do not know we took their ship yet. They are still trying to board the merchant.”

“Cilia!” I yelled up the ramp. “We need to find the bridge and get this ship stabilized. I need you to fly it.” The bridge must be under the stern, and that is where I went.” There were some thuds under my feet as combat ranged below deck.

The door in the stern was flung open, and a smirking male elf with blonde hair and bright green clothes came out, “I destroyed the controls, and only I can fix them. You need me…” His head rolled off his body from a lightning-fast slash from my falchion. I moved into the bridge, and it smelled funky—reminding me of Gareth’s socks, but I quickly examined the controls.

The controls were very simple, and I could see how he had wrecked them, he removed two runic control plates. I guessed he had hidden them somewhere, and that was why he had not fixed the altimeter. It took me ten minutes to make replacements and get the controls functioning again. Cilia hovered nearby as I worked, and I listened to reports. Pakkam’s Wolfguard had found nine pirates below deck, and the hold had goods and twenty-nine prisoners of the pirates. So they had been busy.

Cilia took over and soon had The Night Jewel level and flying. “Storme, I think this is the gauge for their aether crystal over here. It is just under half full. If we do not use the sails, it might not make it back to Skyholme.” Shit, we did not have a trained crew for the rigging.

Leda came rushing into the bridge, “The skiffs have turned around and are racing back to The Night Jewel. Do you want the Maelstrom in the air? They are going to be here in less than ten minutes.”

“How much aether charge do we have left on both ships?” I asked Leda.

She immediately responded, “Under ten percent on the Maelstrom. Just under half on The Night Jewel, but I have no idea what that means for operation time under power.”

“Pakkam, is below deck clear?” I asked the Wolfsguard, who had one cut on his bicep. I moved and healed it while he responded.

“It is huge down there. I have two teams of three still searching. I would suggest seeing if the prisoners know how to fly this beast, but I do not know if they are trustworthy themselves. Do you want me to call up the search teams to help with the skiffs?”

I quickly put the pieces together in my mind, “Station one of the teams below decks in the aether core room. Get the other team on deck. We are going to fight. Cilia and Leda, take the Maelstrom with the delve team and lift off. See if you can distract one of the skiffs. We fight to keep our prize.” I marched to the bow to confront the crew of the Night Jewel.