Chapter 137 Halfling Village

I went and checked on the cats before I returned to the Sky Wraith.   They definitely did not like being locked in the cabin during the fighting, and I think they were smart enough to know what was happening. They were happy to see me and latched on with their appendages. I allowed the cats to follow me back to my temporary ship.

I walked the ship, and the black hull color was some type of epoxy added over the hull, not a black wood like the Night Jewel. I first spent some time in the core control room trying to figure out the aether tech. It was my first time seeing the integration of magic and technology. After looking at it for a while, I believed it was some type of aether scanning system.  An advanced detection system and maybe an imaging system.  The one we had on the Maelstrom was extremely simple.  This system appeared not to be working, and I did not have time to figure out the issues. Aether tech was more common the closer you got to the massive passageways through the shell of the Sphere that led to the outer surface.

The next thing I went through on the new ship was all the runic work.  The artificing work was excellent, just as good as I could do—if not better.  I repaired and checked all the runes and the two aether cannons.  The cats followed me as I worked.  The Sky Wraith was an excellent ship, even by Skyholme standards.  Due to its extra mass, about four times that of the Maelstrom, it would need mithril and adamantine runes to power a massive aether crystal to match our speed.

After confirming the runes were in good working order, I explored the ship.  The bottom deck was mostly cargo with a single common area for cooking and feeding the crew.  The second level had the aether core room, a captain’s cabin, and three large crew cabins with six double bunks each.  This would give the ship a potential crew of thirty-seven.  There was a forward cargo hold and gunnery deck where I had arrived.  The open deck of the ship had a bridge near the bow, and in the stern was a crane and access to the bottom cargo deck.

While the three ships were grappled together, we were making extremely slow speeds.  Leda asked to break the grapples and proceed in a wing formation.  This was in a diagonal line and spaced about one hundred yards apart.  It would allow the Night Jewel a longer run time on its crystal and utilize the natural wind more effectively.  Keeping the Maelstrom and Sky Wraith together was easy, as you just had to tease controls to the correct speed.  On the Night Jewel, Leda constantly adjusted her sails and assisted aetheric propulsion to stay as close in formation as she could.

After we had traveled for fourteen hours, Leda’s voice came over the communication stone, “I need to land soon to charge my aether crystal.  The charts on this ship have a marked halfling village down in the valley a hundred miles ahead.  The charts on this ship do not give any other details, but I never heard of a threatening village of halflings.”

“Cilia, are you good with this?”  I asked.  I was looking forward to getting the ships safely on the ground.  Bleiz had been questioning Maggie, the pirate on the Night Jewel, and I wanted to know his progress.  Talia, Namira, and Zinnia had been tasked with identifying artificed items among the dead pirates and counting the coin.  I already had the cargo manifests for both captured ships.  At least what they claimed to be on board.  Sammie and Lana had each been working on a ship to confirm the manifests we found in both captains cabin.

The valley was filled with green and yellow leaf trees as we approached. The ships were in a straight line, the Maelstrom landing first a quarter mile outside the village.  I was surprised to see the halflings scatter into the surrounding brush and trees.  We had scared them, and if they were not friendly, there was not much we could do. We needed time to recharge.

The Night Jewel and Sky Wraith settled into the water of the glass-like lake and dropped anchor.  I lowered myself into thigh-deep water and started walking into town.  I cast of the cleanliness spell, and I was dry.  Bleiz had joined me, and we walked together into the abandoned village.

As we made our way to the square, I asked, “What did Maggie tell you?”

“A lot. Her pirate superiors can not track the Sky Wraith. Whatever the coating is on that ship prevents magical tracking. The Night Jewel can be tracked with normal magical means. Maggie had an artificial device that acted like a compass.” He handed me a mithril oval. I opened it to find a compass inside.

Bleiz explained, “You set a marker by touching it to an object and channeling a little aether into it. It does not work on people.”

I clicked it shut and tossed it in my hands for a minute before handing it back to Bleiz, “Make good use of it. You are the better tracker and scout than me.” Bleiz pocketed the device appreciatively.

We were in the center of the village looking around. Bleiz said, “The pirate attack is pulling together maybe twenty ships from across the region. They are part of a much larger organization that operates from one of the twenty-three moons. She did not know which moon.”

“Hand of the Crimson Moonriders?” I asked. That was the organization the Aeyln’s mother belonged to.

“No, the Black Marauders. Pirates, mercenaries, thieves—Maggie made it sound like they were a big deal and operated throughout the Sphere. Her ship was low in the hierarchy. The Sky Wraith and the Captain you killed were higher in the chain of command. That was why she contacted him.” Bleiz moved and checked inside a house with smoke from the chimney.

“Do you want me to track down some halflings?” This village looks abandoned. The structures were barely six feet tall, and only a few chickens pecked at the ground. “There were maybe a hundred inhabitants based on the number of structures. Shouldn’t be too hard to find one in the woods.”

“Do it. But try not to scare them,” I said, and Bleiz went invisible. It was weird that a village this small was on the pirate maps. I wandered around the village for twenty minutes before Bleiz returned with a halfling female carrying a child in her arms. She looked afraid but stoic.

Halflings looked like humans, just half the size. This woman had dirty blonde hair and a round face. It was my understanding that halflings lived mostly in cities. I smiled and tried to appear non-threatening, “Well met. I am Storme Hardlight from Skyholme. I was hoping to take advantage of your hospitality while our aether crystals recharge.”

The woman looked skeptical, “We know you are pirates. She pointed with her free hand at the Night Jewel, “That ship has been here before and took our people!” She was trying to hold in her anger. At least this explained why the halfling village was on the map.

“That is a pirate ship, and we have taken it. We have their Captain in custody, and the rest of the crew has been killed or scattered,” I motioned for Bleiz. “Go and bring Maggie the Siren out here. If they recognize her, then they can exact their justice.” It was a thousand gold I would be giving up. If they killed her, then I could always ask for the head for the bounty.

The small woman stood defiantly as Bleiz went to the ship. I could see movement in the woods and activated my aether shield in case they attacked. I kept my sights on the surrounding area as I heard a splash and Beliz approaching. The woman’s eyes went wide, and her face went angry. “So, is this the person that took people from you?” I asked. She nodded but did not talk.

Maggie was bound, collared, and gagged. As if by magic, a stream of halflings came out of the woods. Most were armed, but their weapons were at their side. I announced, “We give you this woman for your vengeance. You can question her on where she brought your family or just kill her. It is up to you. I ask for your leave for us to stay here for a day and recharge our skyships in peace.”

Two halfling males approached, and it did not take long for them to take a struggling Maggie away. An older halfling approached, “Thank you. You are free to stay as long as you wish and welcome to what hospitality we have. I am Wintershod, and this is my daughter Basil.”

I talked with the leader of the village for a few minutes. They were preparing to attack me if I took Basil and her baby aboard my ship. Maybe fifty years ago, they had settled this valley as it was free of roaming monsters and sheltered from much of the Sphere. They did not have anything to trade other than produce. I returned to the Sky Wraith with Bleiz and allowed everyone time to walk the village if they wished.

Sammie and Lana had their report for me regarding the cargo. We had chests of shiny coins from a dungeon, rolled into bundles of one hundred coins each. They had a bat on one side and a flower on the other. It was a massive amount of coin, too. Seventeen thousand four hundred silver coins and over fifty thousand copper coins. All were small in size. It was all only worth 179 gold in total, but it was still a good haul. Private stashes and other coins they found equaled 68 platinum and 90 gold. I ordered everyone to get a twenty-gold bonus and the remainder to be loaded onto the Maelstrom.

The other plunder was crates and crates of material from dungeons. Bones, dried herbs, raw ore, steel weapons, pelts… The Sky Wraith had crashed two ships, and the Night Jewel had captured one ship. The ships must have been transporting dungeon loot to a larger city. There were estimates of the value of it all, about twenty thousand gold.

Talia also had her report. Namira and Zinnia had helped sort out the pirate’s personal effects. The pirate captain Wraith had the most valuables on his person. A small dimensional holding bag with jewels and coins and three high-tier communication stones. There were three dungeon essences inside as well, two tier 1 and one tier 2. I sent it all to my dimensional closet. We would drop the communication stones overboard when we left so they could not be used to track us.

The rest of the weapons and personal effects were also moved to the Maelstrom’s cargo hold. Reading the list, I estimated it was worth just as much, if not more, than the cargo and coin we had already taken. I briefly thought of not turning in the bounty for the Night Jewel. But the logistics of getting the bulky ship back to Skyholme made me hesitate. I could send the Maelstrom back on its own, and it could reach Skyholme in a day. But after the pirate reprisal, I once again decided not to. We would still give the Triumvirate plenty of warning time to prepare. Being away so long was probably making my family and others worry. But we would return soon enough.

I went and removed the aether crystal from the Sky Wraith and brought it aboard the Night Jewel. I had a suspicion that these two aether crystals were from the same dungeon and would resonate with each other. I carefully set up the runic patterns and chained the two crystals together. I was correct. They matched frequency perfectly. The only way to put aether crystals in sequence was if they were the same crystal and broken apart or if the same dungeon created them.

The size and power of these two crystals were impressive, and I could not fathom what type of dungeon challenge monster would reward something this large. If these crystals were harvested by Black Mauraders, then they were an extremely strong organization. I moved the Maelstrom’s dual aether crystals to the Night Jewel. Then the Maelstrom got the Night Jewel’s crystal. This would significantly improve the Maelstrom’s operation time.

Eventually, I could synch the Sky Wraith crystal in the Maelstrom, and it should have almost unlimited operation time, with the crystals recharging faster than the stored aether could be used. It would also give me the ability to add some aether cannons to the Maelstrom in the future. I just needed a replacement aether core for the Sky Wraith.

I was resting in the Captain’s cabin on the Sky Wraith when Bleiz knocked. The cats stirred thinking it was play time. Bleiz informed me, “Storme, I think there are six bounties among the Sky Wraith crew. I am not certain as we did not copy all the bounties. But before we disposed of the bodies I wanted to ask if we should keep their heads?”

“Yes. Do that.” I nodded, stretching after a few hours of sleep.

“Do you want to skin the Captain? The one called Wraith?” Beliz asked. I looked at him strangely, and he explained, “He is from a race of dragonborn. Their skin makes excellent armor and is highly prized.”

It felt a little grotesque to me since he had been a sapient being. I thought for a moment before nodding, “You can take it for yourself to sell or make armor.” The Sphere was a very unforgiving place, and you needed to take advantage when you could.

Bleiz noted before leaving, “Make sure you register the Sky Wraith as a prize capture. Otherwise, someone else might hunt you for the bounty.”

“That was my plan,” I said while feeding the cats. “Do you think I should send the Maelstrom back to Skyholme? It could go and return in less than two days.” My dreams had been a little nightmarish as I imagined the pirates raising Skyholme.

“When we are closer. There are still many dangers, and I think three ships are more intimidating than two,” Bleiz said after considering. “They killed the pirate woman. Do you want me to retrieve her head?”

“Bleiz, you have a lot of gruesome questions today. If possible, then yes. Her bounty is one thousand gold.” I took the cats off the ship and learned that neither of them liked getting wet. I had to carry them to shore like a princess. The halfling children started to play with them before their frantic parents pulled them away.

A few crew were in town visiting the locals, being amicable. I found Wintershod, the halfling leader, and offered to offload some of my less valuable cargo from the dungeons. My reasoning was not altruistic as I wanted to try and lighten the skyships. He accepted, and we dumped twenty crates of hides and steel weapons from dungeons. About two tons worth. I did not ask for any compensation.

Wintershod was in disbelief, “You are generous, Storme Hardlight. I feel ashamed to ask this of you.” He paused to look over the massive crates. Many were damaged from when I rolled the Sky Wraith, but the items were usable. “We had nineteen of our people taken by the pirates. Before we stoned her, she told us they were sold in the goblin city of Iron Splinter. If you have it in your capacity to find them and rescue them…” He was reaching out and trying to get sympathy from me.

I felt for his people but knew it was not feasible, “The best I can do for you is give you the maps on the pirate ships where the city is located. The pirates are organizing an attack on my home islands, and I need to return there and help defend them.”

“Maybe after…” he started, but I shook my head sadly.

He sighed and handed me a piece of paper, “I understand. But if you have the opportunity, here is a list of their names and descriptions.” The halfling was doing a good job of trying to guilt me. I took the list and sent it to my dimensional closet.

I hesitated before offering, “I am an excellent healer. If you have anyone in your village in need of healing, I would be happy to heal them for free. I can even regenerate missing teeth.” My offer was not entirely altruistic, as I was still trying to increase the level of my lesser restoration spell.

“That is most generous. I will put the word in the town to see you if they wish to take advantage. We only have a lesser healing among our number,” Wintershod bowed but could not mask his disappointment in me not rescuing his village members.

I helped move the crates into the village, and slowly, the halflings came forward to seek healing for minor injuries. I paused in the work to heal, and word spread as each halfling was healed and ran to find a friend or family member. Maybe I healed half the village of some ailment, restored teeth, or cured limps and aches.

With the healing done, and crates unloaded, I pulled my crew back to the ships. Bleiz gave me a nod, indicating he had collected the head of Maggie. A few hours later, all three ships were back in the sky and making our way to the Principality of Marstrom.

The next three days, we landed in small towns to recharge. We dumped the stones and everything not considered valuable off the ships to make them lighter and use less aether. The first stop had most of the pirate’s prisoners leave us as we had reached a large enough settlement that they could find their way home. This freed up the Wolfsguard from guard duty, and they had learned a little about managing the Night Jewel rigging. Losing the experienced sailors added another day to our trip, but we finally reached the border of the Principality on our map.

Two medium skyships with sails and flying the flag of the Principality, a green field with a white owl, intercepted our fleet of three ships. They approached cautiously as we were flying flags of captured ships. They sent over a small skiff with six soldiers on board. The lead soldier stepped onto the deck of the Sky Wraith.

“Captain Volantis of the Prince’s Royal Navy,” the middle-aged human introduced himself.

“Captain Storme Hardlight of the Adventurer’s Guild.” I shook his hand and produced the bounty. He took it and read it carefully.

“The ship was taken seven years ago. The bounty should still be valid, Captain. Thank you for returning her. Most privateers just sell the ships in the nearest port for more coin than the bounty. I suggest we escort you to the capital of the Principality to process the bounty through the Adventurer’s Guild Hall there. Anywhere else, and it will take a few days to receive your coin.” The stern Captain said.

“How long does it take to process the claim in the capital?” I asked.

“No more than a day or two. They will inspect the ship and transfer the funds from the treasury to the Guild Hall. The Principality does impose a 10% on the Adventurer’s Guild, but they may wave it in this circumstance as it was in service to the Prince. I can not guarantee it, though.” He said with a small, hard smile.

“Let us go to the capital then,” I acknowledged. It would be just another day to reach it rather than landing in the nearest city a few hours away. Once we had our prize coin, the Sky Wraith and Maelstrom could make a good time back to Skyholme no longer burdened with the slow Night Jewel.