Chapter

I was on the bow and studying the two skiffs rushing toward us.  They were weaving even at this great distance.  We did not have time to figure out how to operate the aether cannons on the Night Jewel.  I could not discern the numbers they had at this distance. I figured if I was going to be doing a lot of skyship combat in the future, I would need to imprint a spell to give me enhanced sight.  It was too late now.

Cilia and Leda were on the Maelstrom, and I held my communication stone in hand, “Cilia, take off if both skiffs reach the deck.  If only one reaches then, we should be able to handle them.”  I was guessing there were maybe twenty pirates on each skiff.

Leda replied through the stone, “If we have to take off, we will make our way to land in the mountains to recharge the aether crystals.”

“Understood.”  I turned and ordered the delvers back on board the Maelstrom with the exception of Talia and Sammie.  “Talia, get on the stern deck, and offer ranged support to the Wolfsguard.  Sammie, protect her.  All other delve team members on board the Maelstrom.  I need you to protect the skyship.”

Bleiz, Pakkam, and his seven Wolfsguard were already forming behind me.  A few Wolfsguard were below deck, protecting the aether power crystal room. Everyone had been healed and was ready.  I turned to them, “Ok, I will take the one on the right.”  I looked back out over the expanse of sky between us.  I got up on the forward railing, the wind rushing through me.  I felt like the king of the world with the lowlands far below.  When the skiff got close enough for me to identify the pilot, I jumped forward off the Night Jewel.  I fell quickly below the railing and then used my exchange ability.

I was instantly on the lead skiff almost a mile away, and the pilot was falling to the lowlands below the Night Jewel in my place.  I focused on my task.  I turned the skiff hard left, and my hands brushed the controls. I just merged all runes together with my metal shaping.  The skiff should just make circles in the sky now.  When it ran out of aether, it would plummet to the ground.

The entire skiff was ten feet wide and twenty-five feet in length.  The pirates were fast to realize I was an enemy.  The skiff was just an open deck with low rails on the side, and the pilot statin was exposed in the front.   An axe was already swinging at my head, and I rolled forward, throwing an iron ball with a flash-bang alarm spell on it.  My falchion came in an upswing out on my roll on an old human male pirate.  My sword briefly sparked on an aether shield before connecting.  His surprised face went to his groin as his intestines spilled onto the deck.  My flash-bang spell never went off, and I cursed whatever mage had canceled it.

Behind me, the axe wielder had buried his axe in the deck and was trying to remove it.  I stabbed my falchion between his shoulder blades, severing his spine.  As he collapsed, a tall woman with night-black hair snarled in common tongue, “You will regret this!” and she threw something at me.  I recognized her as Maggie the Siren, the captain from the bounty posters.  I used my exchange ability with a pirate at the back of the skiff.

As I oriented myself, the skiff rocked in an explosion.   That was surprising as she had probably damaged the controls further.  The other skiff was approaching rapidly, and two pirates leaped from it and flew over to our skiff.  They were unlikely mages, so they were probably using an ability or artificed device to facilitate flying.

I needed to get a flying method as well if this was going to become my new normal.  I also should have planned to have a pirate strapped to the Black Jewel mast to escape using my exchange ability.  I was still in lightning reflexes overdrive mode and hacked and slashed with my sword, holding off the angry pirates cursing in unknown languages. My aether shield flashed in return, signaling it was getting close to expiring.

It would take too long to cast an arcane web to slow them all, so I jumped off the skiff and exchanged with a pirate on the other skiff that was close by.  A scream from the rapidly falling pirate cut the air, but I did not track him as fifteen fresh, irate pirates were on me.  A blackness overcame my vision, probably from a blindness spell.

I didn’t have time to dwell on it as a massive blow suddenly struck me, and was flying through the air off the skiff.  The impact had also canceled my active spells.  It had been some type of impact and counterspell spell rolled into one.  My aether shield had popped, and the air was forced from my lungs.  Breathing was hard, so I assumed I had cracked or broken ribs.

I healed myself with the flash heal, easing my strained breathing.  My healing had no effect on the blindness, so it was temporary magic and not directly damaging my eyes.  I was spinning wildly in the air and went through my abilities and inventory for a solution.   The worst-case scenario was I fell to the ground about two miles below, and my new ring activated.  I could already sense gravity was starting to take over.

I was not scared or worried at all.  I cast invisibility first, not wanting to get targeted by the pirates of the skiff.   After losing my aether shield, I had a delay before I could recast it.  The delay was over, so I cast it again, creating a disc to prevent myself from plummeting to the lands below.   All these things had occurred in a few seconds.  I was standing on an aether disc, invisible, blind, and high in the air.  The wind in my ears made figuring out the directions of the action impossible, too.  I could not find out where the Night Jewel or pirates were. This was definitely a live-and-learn moment.

I took stock of my mistakes. Even with my enhanced speed, these pirates had magic devices to slow me down. They were also experienced in this type of abnormal combat, having canceled my flash-bang alarm spell.

The darkness was really annoying, and I needed to solve this problem first.  I quickly examined my options; maybe I could cast an alarm spell with no conditions, and it set it off.  It would give me a brief image flash.  There was a globe of blackness over my head.  The caster must have anchored a small darkness spell over my head.

I looked at the skiffs with a few alarm image flashes.  Okay, I could work with this.  I started chain-casting alarm spells and triggering them, giving me a flickering form of sight.

About a mile away, the second skiff tried connecting with the first one that was circling since I had wrecked the controls.  It looked like they were going to put everyone on board the second skiff and then pursue the Night Jewel.  The Night Jewel was headed straight toward me.  The sky was a big place, and maybe it was angled down some and off to my left.

I wish I knew how long the blindness would last, as the image flashes gave me a headache.  I was kind of on an island here.  I brought my communicator to my lips, “Leda?”

“Storme, where are you?” A worried Leda yelled into the communication stone.

“Who is piloting the Night Jewel?”  I asked calmly.

“I am!  Cilia is on the Maelstrom, and neither of us can find you!” She sounded worried and maybe a touch fearful.

“I am fine.  Come left about fifteen degrees and slow down,” I ordered.  The massive black ship slowly turned like a Goliath of the skies.  I kept fine-tuning her course until the ship would come under me.  I seized the mast as the ship passed under me.  The wind was knocked from me on impact, and I had to do some more healing as I had damaged my ribs for the second time today.  I released the invisibility spell and began to descend awkwardly.

Pakkam yelled up, “Master Mage, do you require assistance?”  He had an amused grin that he was probably not aware I could see.  I activated my lightning reflexes and left go, dropping to the deck.  My spell absorbed the shock of the abrupt stop.  I stood, and Pakkam still had an amused look.  I guess I had not impressed him as I had hoped.

Talia rushed to me, took out a wand, and dispelled the blackness around my head. I was blinded by the strong light as my pupils slowly acclimated. “Thank you, Talia. How are things looking for us?” I asked Pakkam.

“We are picking up speed after picking you up.  The skiffs are behind us but can catch us quickly if they want to,” he briefed me.

I went to the stern of Night Jewel, Bleiz joining us.  From the stern of the skyship, I could see the two skiffs had merged.  The pirates were all climbing onto the functional skiff.  As Pakkam predicted, they abandoned the skiff I had sabotaged.

“My plan to sweep through their number after exchanging place with one of them sort of worked. I killed six—unless they had some superior healing. They have a lot of experienced fighters on board, and most have aether shields,” I summarized.

“Did you think it would be easy?” Pakkam asked, amused.

I considered before answering, “No, but I thought we would have the element of surprise. What do you think we should do?”

He looked at the approaching skiff, now packed with pirates eager to regain their ship. “Their skiffs do not appear to have weapons. Or maybe they just do not want to fire on their own ship.”

AWolfsguard behind us announced, “Thirty-seven pirates are on the skiff.” Pakkam nodded.

Pakkam explained, “Tibalt has the eagle eyes ability. These small stern aether cannons might dissuade them some, but unlikely.” Pakkam offered, “We could have the Maelstrom ram the skiff?”

At first, I thought that was a stupid idea, but the Maelstrom was reinforced and should survive. I did not have much time as they were going to overtake us quickly. The added mass of more passengers had slowed the skiff, but it was still much faster than the Night Jewel.

“I will give it a shot,” I said, taking the idea and running with it.

I raced up the ramp and yelled, “Everyone off!” The delvers moved off the ship and on the bridge, I told Cilia the same thing, “Off Cilia! I am going to crash the Maelstrom into their skiff.”

Her jaw opened and then closed, “I am five times the pilot you are, Storme.” She was moving her hands along the controls, and the Maelstrom was lifting off.” We tore some rigging lose as we left and circled off the Black Jewel. We turned on the skiff. “Shall we go invisible?”

I looked at the dangerously low aether gauge. “No, we can not risk it. We will just power up our other defenses. I hope this works.”

Cilia seemed confident, “The skiff is highly maneuverable, but the Maelstrom even more so. I will not miss it.” The skiff was making a slow looping zig-zag to avoid aether cannon fire. Their evasions were slowing them down, which was good. Cilia was already aiming straight for them. I could see additional aether shields being erected, powerful enough to reflect sunlight off their surface. They had some good mages in the crew.

At about a hundred yards, distant spells began to attack the Maelstrom. Lightning, fire, ice, rock, and arrows started connecting with our shielding and hull. I do not think they thought we were trying to ram them. The idea was probably too far out there. Cilia had go hard right and then pull up sharply as the belly of the Maelstrom collided with the skiff.

A loud crunching sound could be heard from below, and wood splintered under the force. The Maelstrom also jumped in a hard rebound. I could hear the cats hissing and meowing in my cabin, afraid. Cilia was turning around to see what damage we had done to the pirate barge. I let the cats come to the bridge to calm them.

When we got our sights on the barge, I was shocked by what I saw. Not a single pirate was smooshed like I had hoped. But they were all moving feverously around the small skiff.

Cilia noticed it first, “We overloaded their runes!” I studied the pirates, and we had. The mass of the Maelstrom on top of their own ship must have burned out some of their anti-gravity runes. The skiff was losing altitude rapidly. Cilia asked, “Do you want me to hit them again?”

“No, they are falling faster and faster. I think most of the pirate crew will die in the crash,” I said with some hope. Magic was flexible, though. “Land us back on the Black Jewel,” I finally said. We needed to conserve our own aether reserves.

After landing, I went to the stern of the ship and watched with others as the skiff turned into a tiny black dot. Pakkam said, “You do realize you have created some enemies today. Those who survived will remember the Maelstrom. It is a unique ship.”

“Should we go and make sure they are all dead?” I asked for advice.

“No point risking lives. You got what you came for, and no one has died,” Pakkam said seriously.

“Agreed. Keep everyone on high alert. The ship could have traps and hidden pirates.” I said to everyone around me.

Bleiz smiled, “I will find anyone that is hiding on the ship. Neoma, care to join me?” The athletic Wolfsguard woman nodded, and they left to go below decks to conduct a search.

Pakkam said, “I will remain vigilant with Tibault on deck.”

Leda and Cilia had joined us. Cilia asked, “Do I get to pilot this monstrosity now?” She sounded excited even though it was not an agile and fast ship like the Maelstrom.

“Yes, take us back toward Skyholme. Best speed,” I stated. I was actually worried as a lot of threats that we could outrun with the Maelstrom would be impossible with this beast of a ship.

“We will probably need to land to recharge the aether crystals. Without using the sails, it is going to be a major drain of the core,” Leda noted. I nodded and spent time giving everyone assignments. Leda would remain on the Maelstrom while Cilia piloted the Night Jewel. I finally had time to examine the aether crystal powering the captured ship.

The runic chamber was below the bridge, and I found two Wolfsguard guarding it. The aether crystal core was a thing of beauty and probably worth more than the entire ship. It was a tier seven aether crystal and larger than my fist. By my estimation, it could hold twice as much aether as my two damaged sister cores on the Maelstrom. It would recharge fast enough that we would never need to land. If the invisibility and defenses were active, it would drain it faster than we could recharge.

If I swapped the aether cores, I was guessing that my dual cores would only operate the Night Jewel for less than four hours. It would be enough to evacuate Skyhold Citadel for the Triumvirate and complete my obligations for ruling the Black Spire.

The next two hours, Bleix and Neoma found four pirates hiding in the ship in secret compartments. They were killed, stripped, and thrown overboard, as none had a bounty attached to them.

I went and talked with the prisoners. I had no plans to release them but would bring them back to Skyholme and free them there. The group was mostly merchants and sailors, and they spoke an assortment of languages. They came from two different merchant skyships that had been captured.

We had been lucky as Maggie the Siren had moved a dozen of her men to each of these prize ships to sell. They were not on board. The cargo holds were also full of captured goods, and I had my delve team take inventory.

Leda came and sat with me and explained our situation, “Storme, we are landing on a lake with a small town. Storme, without using the sails, it will take two weeks to get back to Skyholem! We will have to spend half our day recharging the aether core.”

“That long?” That would take me awfully close to my deadline and the opening of Skyholme to trade. I started to reconsider using the sailors in the hold to help.

Leda was thinking the same thing, “Even if we took a dozen of the men who knew how to run the rigging for the sails, it could cut our time in half, maybe even more.”

“We already have four Wolfsguard watching them in the hold. We could not watch a dozen men running around on deck. They probably trust us as much as we trust them.” I said, getting a headache at my predicament. “Let’s go through the captain’s papers first. Maybe we can get more of an idea about the prisoners.”

Talia joined Leda and me in Maggie the Siren’s quarters. She had an alarm lock on the door that I quickly took apart. She was actually extremely organized for a pirate and had logs of captured ships, their cargos, where she sold them, and for how much. “I did not understand how she could be making this much gold and still be a pirate.” I had muttered that aloud.

“She doesn’t work for herself,” Talia responded. “Look, she takes orders from someone called the Sky King.” Leda and I moved to Talia and read with her. She was right. She sent her captured ships back to a pirate port city for sale and got a small percentage of the sale. We paged through the document and found her latest orders.

The Night Jewel was to join a fleet of pirate ships to attack a single target together. They were answering a contract put out by one Abaddon Bricio. The Bricios had hired the Sky King or given him knowledge of the vulnerabilities of the Islands. The pirate fleet was due to assemble in one week at the goblin city of Ironsplinter. We searched the cabin for the location of the goblin city and looked at her maps. Although her maps were organized, they used a multitude of formats in different languages. We could not find a reference to where the pirate city was located.

Talia asked, “What are we going to do?”

“Land. Once I can be sure the Black Jewel can make it back on its own, I will send the Maelstrom back to warn them. I am guessing they are planning their attack when Skyholme opens up for free trade,” I said. Loriel was expecting dozens of foreign ships from the Sadian cities. It would be an opportunity for the pirates and spoil Loriel’s plans.