Chapter 142

The islands approached, and a Harbinger and Wasp skyship veered up and out of the silhouette of the island.  Leda had the right flag flying on our ships, so we would unlikely be attacked by mistake.  The Wasp circled our five ships and came up behind our small fleet.  I was sure they would recognize the Maelstrom as it was famous on the islands.  I went up on the top deck, which was more of a viewing platform.

My absolute time spell told me it was late at night.  Even if I did contact Remy with my comm stone, he was probably sleeping.  I pulled it to my hand from my storage and placed it in my pocket.  I might need to contact Cilia, who is piloting the Sky Wraith.

The Wasp swung in closer, flying cautiously against our mini armada.  I felt a sending in the air around me.  A clear voice appeared in my ears, “High Mage, it is great you have returned.  People were getting worried.  I am Shipmage, Johan.  Who are the three ships traveling with you?”

It was a simple air spell to communicate over distance.  I focused my eyes on the Wasp, identifying the mage on deck, and spoke normally, “The black ship is my captured prize and will be docking at the Black Spire.  The other three ships are from the Principality of Marstom.  Two are an escort for an ambassador, and the third is a trader.  They wish to open trade.”

I had to wait while the mage talked with a superior on the deck.  He obviously was young and had not evolved the spell much, or he could have brought others into our conversation.  His voice soon came back, “My captain said all the ships can land at the Black Spire…” he paused, and I assumed he was listening to someone, “correction.  Your two guest escort ships can land at the Spire.  Your prize ship can dock at Skyhold Navy to be registered.  The trade ship can hold position over the Spire while an inspection team arrives.  I am sorry, but word came that an attack is imminent, and all foreign ships are to be searched.”

That was good news because it sounded like they had received the warning I sent through the Adventurer’s Guild.  The orders made sense as well.  I also only had two cradles for skyships that would normally land in the water at the Black Spire.

“Confirmed.  I will let the captains know,” I replied.  The Maelstrom came alongside Captain Volantis’ ship, and I informed him where we were landing, and to follow us.  I used the comm stone to send Cilia and the Sky Wraith to the Skyhold Citadel docks.  If this was a ploy by Loriel to seize my new ship, I would never forgive her, and all trust we had built would be erased.

The Harbinger and Wasp followed us at a distance.  I approached from the far side of the capital island to avoid having the Marstom warships fly over the city.  The opening of free trade was still days away, and as far as I knew, only the Sadian Empire was participating to start.  I waited for the two Marstom ships to land before landing the Maelstrom at the Black Spire.  A half dozen men and women spilled out of the Spire in silvery gray uniforms.  Isla was leading the procession and she looked like she had been crying.  Her eyes were red and puffy.

Panic welled up in me, “What is wrong?  Is my family ok?  Did someone die?  Callem?  Gareth?”

“What?  No!  I am happy to see you alive!  Everyone thought you were dead!”  She rubbed her eyes.

“No, I sent word back through the Adventurer’s Guild Hall days ago.  Was word never received?”  I gave her a hug and also healed her swollen eyes.

“We did not receive any word.  All the cities on all the islands have been put on alert for a possible attack.  But no one mentioned anything about you being alive.”  Isla said and looked past me as a group led by Captain Volantis was approaching.  Princess Amelia was at the top of the ramp, uncertain if it was appropriate to descend.

A Wasp ship flew in low, coming from the city.  It landed hard next to the Maelstrom, and both Sebastian and Callem were on deck and quickly disembarked to meet with me.  Two dozen navy fighters and two mages quickly formed a line against the two foreign ships.  It was not threatening, just protective of the two old men.  Isla stepped back with the array of servants in silvery gray uniforms from the Spire.

Sebastian spoke first, “Storme, glad you are alive.  I told them you would be back.  You know how to stir the winds!  I sent eight Wasps into the skies when your five ships were spotted!  It looks to be a false alarm.  We received word six days ago that the Black Mauraders were going to attack.  We have been doing everything we can to prepare, and I am glad you are back.  Your skill set is sorely needed.”  He clapped me on the back and smiled.

I digested and then emphatically said, “I sent the message!  How did you not know I was alive!?”  I was somewhat angry at not being given credit and guilty that people thought I was dead.

Callem answered, “We received an alert from the Adventurer’s Guild, and they asked us if we wanted to post any quests to hire interested captains in the Sphere.  It did not say anything about you.”

I spoke to myself, “Drangon’s tits, Guildmaster Merit, screwed up the message.  I should have told him specifically what I wanted to sendin the mesage,” my temper flared, and I wanted to fly back and yell at him.  Although he did say, he was going to relay the danger to the Skyholme Adventurer’s Guild.  Not anything beyond that.  I would have to take this one as my mistake.  And Skyholme had started preparing.

Callem stepped forward, “We need to talk about your—guests, Storme.”

Captain Volantis had walked up and was waiting patiently twenty feet away.  I motioned him to me, “This is Captain Volantis of the Principality of Marstom, and this is Princess Amelia of the Principality of Marstom.”  As if waiting for her introduction, she walked down the ramp in a stately fashion.  Her old woman attendant was behind her, and her two guards were following.

“Pleasure to meet you, admirals.  Your gentle and skilled skyship captain has brought me safely to your shores.  He promised to introduce me to your ruling Triumvirate.” She turned and gestured gently, “Captain Volantis and his fellow captain, are here to ensure my safety and the safety of the Prince’s trade ship.  We are open to incorporating them into your defensive planning as skirmishers or scouts.”  Her voice was confident and authoritative.

This was not the woman I had spent the last four days with.  That woman had been inquisitive, questioning, playful with the cats, and pleasant at our meals.  Now, she looked prepared to go into battle.  Sebastian said, “Loriel wants to see you, Storme.  That is why we are here.”  He gestured to the Wasp behind him.

Amelia inserted herself, “I would be amenable to meeting Triumvirate Loriel at this time.”

Sebastian considered and nodded.  I asked, “Has my family been told that I have returned?”

Callem nodded, “After the skyship confirmed you were on board, I used a stone to tell Wynna.  She informed them.”  A rare smile crept onto his lips, “Freya has a surprise for you as well.”

“She awakened?”  I guessed.

“Still act surprised when she tells you,” Callem said, nodding and ending his smile.  I would much rather talk with Freya and my parents than go to Skyhold and talk with Loriel.  I was starting to enjoy my time with Amelia, but now I was guessing it was an act to drill me for information.

I considered the events as they were and made a decision.  “You can transfer the Princess’ possessions to the Wasp.  While you do that, I will talk to my architect to catch up.  I should not be any longer than half an hour.  Isla, let’s go inside the Spire to talk privately.”

The first floor of the Black Spire had been transformed.  It was now a training and storage area for the delve teams. I was curious how they did while I had been away with most of the leaders. Isla, “The second-floor offices have been converted into small offices for the delve team. The third-floor residential suites have been cleaned and prepared for guests.”

“Excellent. How is the Wolfsguard village coming along?” I asked about the most important project.

“Production slowed when coin ran out. The stone mage has set all the foundations, and two buildings have been completed,” Isla said reluctantly. That was my priority project, so I was not expecting good news on the rest of the projects. I already knew the guard barracks between the two skyship cradles had not even begun.

“The Shiny Platinum? The adjacent park and the warehouse with the portal?” I asked.

“Completed.” She winced, knowing I would not be happy at her next words. “Loriel requested it be done as soon as possible because the Sadian mages were arriving to construct the portal.” I just breathed deeply. “The park looks really nice, but we did not add the balconies to the apartment at the Shiny Platinum yet.”

“What is the debt situation like?” I had been gone two weeks, so it could not be too bad.

“Fourteen thousand owed to three companies,” she said guiltily.

“How much to complete the Wolfsguard village?” I asked, thinking it was not so bad.

Isla once again looked a little sick, “Prices have been increasing in the last week, but I locked up most of the contracts. Ninety thousand. But you would have to check with Remy to be sure.”

“The barracks by the cradles? The farmhouse renovation? And is the portal warehouse paid in full?” I asked about the remainder of the funds.

“The farmhouse is finished. The carpenters were idle so I assigned them there. The wood has been paid for the barracks. As has the balcony stone and labor for the Shiny Platinum. The Stone Mage has just been too busy here. Four thousand of the fourteen thousand debt is for the warehouse,” she explained. I nodded as things were not that bad. I pulled the chests from the Prince, Pirates, bounties, platinum for transporting the Princess, and some platinum I had also created.

Isla’s mouth gaped at all the treasure. I shrugged, “Pirate hunting is profitable. I think this should cover your needs. We can not have the High Mage in debt.”

“What am I to do with all this?” She was still shocked by the chests full of ordered trays of coins.

“Have Lana help you move it with her dimensional space. Get the copper and silver exchanged at the Skyholme Mints for gold. Is there anything else I need to be aware of?” I asked, thinking the Black Spire was taken care of.

Isla hedged and then admitted, “Loriel docked the Heaven’s Descent at the Spire’s cradles. It lifted off when word came you were returning.” The was the Harbinger I had refurbished the runes for. Our agreement was she would not station her private ship at the Spire if I had the escape skyship for the children of Skyhold ready. She had broken the agreement.

“How long?” I asked, more curious than angry.

“Seven days after you left. About seven days now,” she admitted. Loriel had violated our contract. I still had almost a week to fulfill the skyship and Spire guards. She would probably make the excuse that news of the pirate attack was coming. The math didn’t hold as she docked her Harbinger three days before I sent the message through the Adventurer’s Guild.

“I will deal with it when I see Loriel. I have a skyship to station here and just need a few more guards. Thank you, Loriel. You did well with the exception of the portal warehouse. Take care of this,” I waved at the chests. I offered her a smile.

I walked out of the Black Spire and found the Princess, Sebastian, and Callem talking animatedly. Leda was standing next to them with all the information we had on the attack in a folder. As I got closer, they were talking about me. Well, about my accomplishments in the Annuals. “Take us to Skyhold Sebastian and dock near the Sky Wraith so I can give them orders.”

“Looked like an impressive ship when we passed her. I would love a tour,” Sebastian said excitedly. We both had a love of skyships, and the Sky Wraith was an excellent ship. I agreed, and we were soon in the air. I took out my communication stone and tried Remy. It was early morning, but they would be awake if news had reached them.

Remy’s voice came through the stone clear. They had a range of twelve hundred miles, and Aegis City, although on another island, was about 400 miles distant. “Storme! We just heard you are back. Are you landing at the Shiny Platinum?”

“I am headed to Skyhold and meet with the Loriel. What news of the last two weeks? Is my family well and the delve teams?” I inquired.

Remy came back and spoke rapidly and excitedly, “Your family is good. I had lunch with Freya and Monty yesterday. She is going to be thrilled to see you.” I could hear him wanting to tell me that Freya had awakened, but he kept her secret.

“The delve team quota is half-expected, but we are managing. The Shiny Platinum sales are up with people supporting the High Mage healer in his absence. I will take some credit for that. Isla has some bad news about expenses, though. I was only able to siphon her a hundred gold a week.”

“I took care of the funds. Isla has them and will address our depts and ramp up construction again,” I informed him.

“Some bad news in Solaris City.” Remy started, “The owners of the warehouses called in the right to purchase.” Remy was silent, as I thought. I had rented the warehouses with a right to purchase them. Now, seeing bigger profits on the horizon, the owners were forcing me to buy the warehouses or end my leases.

“Remind them I and the High Mage. I will gather the funds and pay them off.” I stated, but it seemed no matter what I did, I never had enough coin. “Send the amounts to Isla.”

“Okay, Storme. When will you be at the Shiny Platinum?” Remy asked.

“Soon. We need to prepare. Skyholme is likely to be attacked soon, and I plan to move my family to the Black Spire.” I was sure Freya and mother would go, but father would stay.

“So it is true? There are all kinds of rumors floating around,” Remy said.

“A pirate organization called the Black Mauraders. Their leadership is based on the Dark Moon. The Bricios hired them to attack Skyholme,” I said truthfully.

Remy was silent and finally whispered, “Understood before ending the stone call.”

The Wasp had landed, and the Wolfsguard crew were helping unload the Princess’ luggage. The Sky Wraith and a Triumvirate honor guard escort were nearby. I overheard Sebastian tell Princess Amelia that her ship had passed inspection and was directed to land in Aegis City.

I did not go with the escort, Princess, Callem Leda, and Sebastian. Instead, I boarded the Sky Wraith and gave orders. Pakkam was to not let anyone board the ship. Cilia and Lana were to get whatever paperwork completed done to register the ship and hopefully fly it back to the Black Spire. Talai and Delphia were to get all the cargo transferred to the warehouses in Solaris City.

I went down to the control room and spent some time removing the aether core crystal. I stalled the dual crystals that had been in the Maelstrom. This would decrease the operation time of the Sky Wraith, but once I paired the two powerful crystals on the Maelstrom, she would have unlimited flight time, and I could start experimenting with the aether cannons.

This had taken me an hour, so I was late for the meeting with Loriel. Two guards had waited for the High Mage to finish, so I only needed to follow them. I found the group in a dining room with more food than a hundred people could eat. Leda, Callam, and Sebastian sat together and worked on the documents from the skyship concerning the attack. Loriel and Princess Amelia were seated at the table’s wide head and talking amicably.

Loriel acknowledged mewith a smile, “I think I am jealous, Storme, your Princess got to have meals with you every day, and you had the most fascinating conversations.” She sounded polite, and it was just a teasing statement. “You are also the one who sent the warning about the Black Mauraders. And you captured an intriguing ship! You have been busy, High Mage Storme!” She smiled, toasted me, and drank.

I took a seat and filled my plate. The food the Prince set was superior, but I was hungry. I ate, not getting drawn into the conversation yet. I was waiting for Sebastian and Callem to decide the relevancy of the information. Loriel and Amelia had shifted their conversation topic from me to trade, and they were enthusiastically talking about margins and the viability of certain goods.

Sebastian finally said, “The Maurader meeting place is not as stated. It is some type of code that maybe powerful magics can decipher. There are no notes on the number of ships they are assembling. My guess is they do not know and just called everyone together in the region.”

Loriel asked, “How strong a fleet do you think?”

Sebastian frowned, “If the Sky Wraith and the Night Jewel are any indication, then I think we should be worried. The Night Jewel, from what Leda told me, is a match for a Harbinger. The Sky Wraith, more so.”

Amelia volunteered information, “You should review the information the Adventurer’s Guild has. There is a wide variety of skyships that the Mauraders operate.”

Loriel frowned, “The Adventurer’s Guild operations have been limited in Skyholme. The Triumvirate strangled them and has just begun to offer more broad services. We are expecting a new Guildmaster in Skyhold and Aegis City, just not for a few months.”

Amelia noted, “Captain Volantis and his sister ship are prepared to help Admiral Sebastian. Both crews have fought pirates before.” She turned to Loriel, “Should we discuss some type of compensation in the area of trade for our help?”

Loriel and Amelia started to go back and forth. I stood, “I am heading to Aegis City.”

“Storme, I would like to discuss the purchase of your prize ship,” Loriel started.

“No! It is the ship to be stationed at the Black Spire to fulfill my obligation as Custodian of the Spire,” I said, annoyed. I knew it was coming, but I thought Loriel would have used Admiral Sebastian.

Loriel did not relent, “It is a warship, and we need warships. I can find another skyship to handle the shepherding duties from Skyhold for you.”

“No, Loriel. I will not even discuss it. You can not commander the ship, either. I read the agreement thoroughly. As long as the ship is docked and crewed, it is free of the Triumvirate and Navy influence.” I let my anger bleed out, and everyone was silent.

“I am going to see my family, and then I am going to help with preparations for the attack. Amelia, you can give the coin to Leda for the Adventurer’s contract, as it is now fulfilled. Leda, get the coin to Remy,” I stated, walking away. I could hear them murmuring behind me, but I did not have time for this. Politicking was not my strong suit. I had no love for guile or using others.

Cilia had a Navy Inspector at the ship working on the registration. I was sure he was slowing the process down in hopes. I left the Navy Docks, went down into the city docks, hired a ship to take me to the Black Spire, and then took the Maelstrom to the Shiny Platinum. As soon as I walked down the ramp, Freya ran into me and hugged me, crying. I just patted her head, “It is all right, Freya. Sorry, it took me so long to get back.”

She quickly controlled her emotions as the cats, happy to be home, raced around the hanger, looking for prey. Freya rubbed her tears away. “You will never guess what Storme! I awakened!”

I put on my best-surprised face, “Amazing! I knew you would!”