Chapter 151

Debris littered the streets, and broken bodies struggled to regain their senses.  I moved to a mother shielding her daughter and quickly diagnosed both.  The mother was relatively unscathed, but the young girl was unconscious with a shattered spine.  “Lay her flat, I ordered.”

The woman continued to rock her daughter, and I realized the concussive blast from the explosion had ruptured her eardrums.  I healed her ears quickly and repeated, “Lay her flat so I can heal her.”  It was an investment of aether, but I healed the girl’s spinal cord and vertebrae.  I was relieved when I finished the healing, and the young girl moved her legs, coming awake.

Suddenly, another explosion occurred in the upper city.  I realized it was in the direction of the Navy skyship dock.  How did they manage to get through the defenses?  I had an inkling that maybe the loss of the keystone had done more damage to Skyholme’s ability to defend itself than I had thought.  It was not something I could linger on.  If Skyholme was going to be overwhelmed, then maybe I should order the Sky Wraith to flee with everyone at the Spire squeezed on board.

There were still no enemies around, just the inevitable approach of the black dots above—no, a ship was moving to intercept them.  A foolish captain was trying to take on the fleet by himself.

I passed a body on the ground with red hair that I recognized in a guard uniform, Leon Morgensen. His arm was at an odd angle, and his chest was rising and falling very slowly. He must have been blown almost a hundred feet from the warehouses. He was conscious as he was letting out a low moan from the pain. I passed by him, choosing not to heal him in favor of another child.

I moved among the bodies and continued healing while waiting for Bleiz.  An old man’s leg, a pregnant woman’s head, a child’s crushed chest just moments from death.  The bodies seemed endless, and as I moved to another, a black skyship rushed low over the outer walls.  The Maelstrom did not slow fast enough to land easily on the ground.  Instead, it skidded into a tailor’s shop, and a loud crash added to the debris scattered in the streets.

Unsurprisingly, no one rushed to the crashed skyship.  I could forgive Bleiz, as I understood that controlling the deceleration of the Maelstrom was slightly tricky as it was hard to judge the speed.  Bleiz was definitely going to get more practice in flying the Maelstrom in the future.

I walked over to the Maelstrom lodged into the storefront.  The ramp came down, and Bleiz stood there with a guilty look.  My skyship was tilted as all three landing struts were broken or bent. The hull had runes to strengthen the black abyssal walnut hull. The struts, however, had no such protections.

“Nice job in getting the Maelstrom to me,” I told my friend.  There was no point in being angry at him.  The Maelstrom’s hull was scratched and lightly damaged, but the runic artificing was intact.  I walked up the ramp and toward the bridge, patting Bleiz on the shoulder as I passed.  I heard Kiara and Adrial mewing in distress in my cabin.  I opened the door as I passed to the bridge.  They rushed out, immediately on high alert, but looked uninjured, just a little scared. My presence immediately calmed them.

Bleiz was right behind me, happy I was not angry with him, “Where are we going?”  A lot of ideas played in my mind, but I needed to get into the air first.

I sat in the pilot seat, activated the anti-gravity runes, and eased the skyship back.  The structure groaned around us, and the Maelstrom backed out of the shop. Large chunks of the wooden building fell as the void appeared in the building.  My hands danced across the controls. I swung the Maelstrom around and into the air in a smooth motion.  I activated the runes to make the Maelstrom invisible, and I powered us forward into the sky toward the pirate fleet.

It looked like they were swarming a Harbinger ship that foolishly attacked the superior numbers.  Flashes of lightning and explosions of fireballs burst around the outnumbered Skyholme ship.  I turned to Bleiz, “I don’t know.  I don’t think we can help them.  There are at least thirty pirate ships up there.”

Bleiz studied the scene, his vision superior to mine. “Only ten of the ships are attacking the Harbinger.” I cursed myself for not learning a spell to improve my vision or buying a telescope like Leda’s. I pushed the Maelstrom toward the fighting, covering miles in seconds. As the silhouette came into focus, Bleiz was correct. Most of the forty pirate ships were transports, not warships. I zipped through their formation and saw dozens of men, dwarves, elves, and orcs on the decks of the transports, eager to get down to the island.

None of the ships had been prepared to track us and fire on us. After my pass, Bleiz noted what I had already realized, “They are planning to land large numbers on the islands. This is going to be a bloody fight.”

The cats hissed in a challenge, realizing a fight was on the horizon. I processed everything. I said heavily, “The Black Mauraders would not have attacked and invested so many resources if they didn’t think they were going to win. They are not stupid.”

A large black box dropped from one of the ships and headed toward the island below. It disappeared after it fell just a few dozen feet. “They are bombarding the city before landing,” I noted. “It makes sense why the Harbinger was forced to attack. They couldn’t let them soften the city before landing.”

I turned my sights to the fight. When they repelled an attack, the Harbinger’s aether shields were no longer a solid blue field. Ten pirate ships were firing on it, and the transports were circling wide in an attempt to block off any path of retreat. The fight had only been playing out for minutes, and the Skyholme ship was already in danger of being downed.

I swung wide and looked at the attacking ships. The largest ship had two long, thin aether cannons mounted on a pivoting mount on the deck. “Hang on, Bleiz, I am going to go and say hello.”

“Storme, do not be an idiot. Do not use your exchange ability,” Bleiz barked at me.

“I am not leaving the ship. We are just going to say hi and try and let the Harbinger break from the engagement,” I noted as I lined up my approach and crashed into the deck of the Black Maurader ship.

A number of things happened that I was not expecting. The first was the Maelstrom was jolted hard when I hit the aether shield of the large pirate ship. I realized the runes on the Maelstrom were not able to compensate for the abrupt halt. All of us were thrown into the one-way glass viewport. The viewport cracked from the impact even though I added the best hardness runes. A number of pirates on the deck looked at us in surprise and fear.

The shield on the pirate ship was overcome, and the Maelstrom continued to crash into the deck, accomplishing my goal of removing the two aether cannons from play along with dozens of pirates. The gravity runes on the enemy ship briefly held us in their sway, but soon, we continued on our path, clearing their deck. As we cleared the pirate ship, the viewport cracked and was smeared in blood.

I grunted and quickly found and healed the cats and myself. Bleiz had taken care of healing himself and offered, “I think I am much better at landing than you are, Storme. Maybe I should be the one flying.”

I huffed, took my seat, and got oriented. When we crashed, we lost our invisibility, and it was going to take time for it to reset. I moved to trigger the aether shields and was relieved when they activated. The Maelstrom had taken a lot of damage in the crash, and some runes might have been disabled. I grumbled, “I guess that is why skyships don’t ram each other.”

The shields on the Maelstrom flared as we drew the aether cannon and spell fire from other pirate ships. I went evasive, and our much greater speed made us an unhittable target. I flew through the pirate ships at a speed much greater than anything they could match. I was doing this reckless behavior for a chance for the Harbinger to get away.

The captain was apparently an idiot and waded deeper into the combat. The only thing I could do was serve as a distraction while the Harbinger fought. The Harbinger began to take hits, its shields depleted, and chunks were blasted off the ship. It wasn’t long before the runes were damaged enough that the Harbinger started to dip from the skies. It had only downed one of the pirate ships, but it was the one that had been dropping the explosive devices. “Foolish bravery gets you killed,” Bleiz muttered. I hoped some of the Skyholme men and women on the ship would live.

I said heavily, “We are done here. Bleiz, get on the communication and see if you can find out what is happening elsewhere on the islands.” I turned and pressed the Maelstrom toward Aegis City and the Shiny Platinum.

At the top speed of the Maelstrom, I made the hundred-plus miles in just four minutes. Bleiz was talking to Remy and Leda the entire time on the stone. Cilia and Leda had landed and were with Sebastian in Skyhold, so they had a good amount of information for us.

Leda relayed what they had learned as I heard the Admirals working in the background, “There are three pirate fleets, Storme. One fleet is over Solaris City, dropping explosive devices, and the only skyship there has been downed.”

Bleiz answered, “We know, most of the forty ships here had ground forces. We tried to help but were unable to stop them.” There was a conversation as Leda relayed that information to the Naval staff.

Leda returned, “The fleet over Aegis City is the largest of the pirate fleets, almost one hundred ships, and they have fleets over Deepwell Island and Greatwood Island. Most of the Navy ships are engaging over Aegis City, but they are dropping explosives on the city there as well.”

“How Leda? I thought we had eyes on the fleet in the caldera?” I asked, seeing dots in the distance over Aegis City. Smoke was rising from multiple sites in the city, and my heart ached as my parents, my brother, Gareth, and Remy were there.

Cilia’s voice came over the stone, “It was an illusion. We just heard from the adventurer who had been spying on them. They were watching a dragon-cursed illusion.”

My blood ran cold as I realized the Black Mauraders had revealed themselves intentionally, so we would watch the caldera. We would lower our defenses and catch us unawares if we thought they were over a day away. I asked, “Are they just attacking three islands?”

“Yes,” Leda said. “It looks like they are trying to take the four eastern islands first. They already have soldiers in the cities on Deepwell and Greatwood Island as defenses were weakest there.”

Remy’s voice came across the stone, “They have not landed in the Aegis yet. But Storme,” he paused, “Storme, the skyships docks are a mess. Many skyships have been destroyed from explosives dropped from their ships.”

My throat tightened. My father would have been on duty there today. A sudden rage flowed through me. “Thank you, Remy. I am almost here. I am going to help the Navy fight the ships above the city.”

Leda sounded concerned, “Storme, don’t. Retreat to the capital island. The Navy will eventually reform here for defense.”

I ignored the request from Leda, “Remy, is my mother still at the Shiny Platinum?”

“She is. She was going to leave with Wynna and Ennet this afternoon but didn’t make it,” Remy said heavily. “They are in your parent’s apartment. I am with them, as are all the Shiny Platinum guards. Maybe three hundred people in the Shiny Platinum seeking shelter.”

“Thank you, Remy,” I rapidly approached Aegis City. Skyships battled above the city is a chaotic mess. At a quick glance, the Skyholme Harbingers and Wasps were outnumbered two to one. I turned to Bleiz, who was talking on the communication stone with the others, “Bleiz, get the Maelstrom to the Spire. Cilia and Leda can meet you there.”

Bleiz understood, “I would join you, Storme, if I could.”

I circled wide, looking for a good target. A massive transport ship was far away from the fighting. It was not over the island. A wasp was harassing the transport as dozens of men were on deck waiting to land on the island and invade the city. The massive ship was well defended as strong aether shields flashed from the wasp attacks.

“Bleiz, I will make my way to the Spire after I get my mother out,” I told him. “I am going to exchange with the short dwarf on the stern. Be ready to take care of him.”

I considered trying to the Maelstrom land at the Shiny Platinum, but there was too much combat close to the building, and the last thing I wanted to do was draw attention to the building. My decision was made. I nodded to Bleiz, focused on the dwarf, and used my exchange ability.

My tier four exchange ability was extremely powerful. I was able to bypass the aether shields and anti-teleportation runes by using another person to anchor my ability. I appeared among the pirates and quickly deposited daggers under the chins of the nearest two. I weaved among the enemy, heading toward the lower decks.

The pirates pursued me, but my enhanced speed made me uncatchable. At least, my hubris thought so. My aether shield flashed, and I was blasted into the railing. A thick giant orc had hit me with a mace. I jumped off the ship and smirked, and used my exchange ability on the orc. Once again among the pirates, my falchion flashed in a low arc, removing legs. I raced toward my target again, barreling down the stairs.

I bowled over a surprised pirate, leaving a dagger in his rib cage. There were more pirates below deck than I had expected. I fought my way through the narrow corridor, looking for the control runes. All skyhips had their primary aether crystal somewhere in the center of the ship for directing power to the runes. I couldn’t find the control chamber or turn around as the pirates on the upper deck were rushing down to take care of me as the interloper.

If I couldn’t find the control room, then I could just do as much damage as possible. I started cutting the runic feeds to gravity runes, and inertia sinks. Soon, the ship tilted, and everyone was thrown around inside whenever the pilot turned. I could just imagine the crowded deck of pirates jerking above and sending many of them overboard.

I never found the center control rune, but I did find the primary anti-gravity array. My hand brushed across runes, destroying them. My stomach immediately got light as the large ship started to fall from the sky. My sabotage was complete. I now needed to get off the ship. The pirates were now more concerned with their skyship falling out of the sky.

I reached a port hole and looked for a ship to flee to. A small pirate ship was a mile away, shadowing the ship I was on. The descent started to become aggressive, and I became completely weightless. I focused on a single person on the faraway ship and pushed aether into my exchange ability. I was on the deck alone and spun around to take in the scene. The ship was a lot smaller than I had realized. Two small aether cannons fired on the wasp ship that was buzzing around the massive ship, that I had sent tumbling slowly to the lowlands.

A voice behind yelled, “Logrem! Are we hitting them?” I realized I had just exchanged places with this small ship’s spotter. I turned around, and the dwarf’s face dropped in surprise. “What the fuck did you do with my brother!!” He didn’t continue the conversation and just charged me.

I recalled my falchion from my dimensional space and ran to meet the dwarf who didn’t have a chance. His head was soon falling toward the lowlands, his body bleeding out from a stump where his head used to be. I took in the ship I was currently on. It was even smaller than the Maelstrom, and two small aether cannons fired steadily.

We were far away from the island, and it looked like this small ship had come to the aid of the ship I had just downed. The battle still raged above Aegis City, but it looked like the Harbingers and Wasps were starting to pull back. I swore, “Damn it, I couldn’t turn the tide.” I needed to get into the city and get my mother out.

Another dwarf came on deck, and I turned and raced after her as she fled below deck. There were only seven dwarves below deck, and none of them were prepared for an experienced fighter. Well, a fighter that could move three times as fast as them. Securing the skyship, I ended my lightning reflexes and checked my aether.

I couldn’t believe my aether was down to about 20% of my total pool. Then, I remembered I had been at the healing clinic just before this assault had started. I had been going full-tilt for nearly two hours. I did not have much stamina left as I sat heavily in the pilot seat of this dwarf skyship.

I felt helpless as I brought my new ship up above the island and viewed nearly one hundred pirate ships starting their landing approach. As I gained height, I could see the Skyholme fleet had only crashed maybe a dozen of the pirate ships. This battle was not going well for Skyholme. I had not yet satiated my vengeance for the probable loss of my father. As I approached, the pirate fleet did not move to defend against my small ship. Of course, they still thought my ship was one of their number. I was going to use that against them.

I decided to make one more run at the pirates. At least this time, I would not be crashing the Maelstrom into one of their ships. I did not have much time as the first transports full of pirates and mercenaries were descending into the ruined skyship docks right next to the Shiny Platinum.