Chapter 138

The Principality ships were extremely slow.  We only had about 1200 miles to reach the capital city of Malaise but we were headed into a strong headwind in the Sphere.  The Night Jewel was also struggling and needed to land after half a day to recharge the dual crystals I had transferred to her from the Maelstrom.  Our escorts landed with us and Captain Volantis came to talk with me.

“Storme, if you wish I can station one of my wind mages on board the Night Jewel.  I could see she was struggling with the wind,” he said with a friendly smile.  Even though his ships relied on the wind, they had a much longer operation time than the Night Jewel since the just had to power their anti-gravity runes with their aether crystal.  They could have made it all the way to their capital relying on their winds mages, albeit slowly.

I was not certain about having a foreigner on board but slowly nodded, “If it gets us there quicker, the I agree.  If you do not mind I would like to talk with the wind mage you assign to the ship.  I am not familiar air magic and would be curious what spells they imprinted for their task.”

“Certainly.  The mage will be Jemma.  She is my niece and quite skilled with her spellcraft.  I will be sending two soldiers with her if that is okay?” the Captain noted.  His disposition told me the soldiers would be required for his niece’s assistance.

“Agreed,” I confirmed.

And an hour later, a woman in a spotless uniform and slick back black hair tied into a neat ponytail found me below deck of the Sky Wraith.  She was a head shorter than me and walked stiffly, like her clothes kept her erect.

She formally addressed me at attention, “Captain Storme Hardlight, I am Gemma Hellvein.  I have been assigned to assist the Night Jewel, but was told to report to you for questioning.”

I paused my examination and taking notes on the aether disruptor cannon.  “I was curious about how wind mages develop their spells to help airships fly the skies.  There are rare where I am from.”  The truth was all the islands of Skyholme were just a few hundred miles apart, so there was not a need to travel great distances and conserve aether.

Gemma stood at attention while she talked, her dark green uniform with white piping fitting snuggly, “The tier two spell, gust of wind, needs to be leveled with at least five specific evolutions.  Or the tier three spell, gale, just needs the proper duration enhancement when imprinted.  I have both spells imprinted.” I was confused about why she had wasted spell slots on the same spell.  She answered, “The lesser gust of wind spell gives me more fine control as lesser speed.  Gale is for traveling long distances at best speed. Will that be all?”

“Ah, yes.  Thank you.  Wait, do you have the flight spell?”  I asked.

“No, just the tier one spell glide,” she replied smartly.

“Glide?”  I inquired about the unfamiliar spell.

“It is an easy spell to learn and found in one of our local dungeons in the Principality.  It turns your body into a sail to control your…unintended departure from a skyship. It takes very little aether to maintain, so it is popular.” She smirked, breaking her facade. “And fun.”  She regained herself, “The lowest tier flying spell is tier three, and using four slots on it is not appealing to most Navy mages.”

I nodded, and seeing I was done with questions, she left.  We were grounded for fourteen hours outside a small village in the Principality. The two medium Navy ships remained with us as our guards.  I didn’t sense any malicious intent but still told Pakkam and the others to be on the lookout.  Their response was that they always were ready.  The small town had nothing of value to trade, but I focused on stripping the Night Jewel of everything of value.  The bounty reward was for just the ship.  I was unsure if I could also take the two crystals I had replaced, but they were worth nearly twenty-five thousand gold.  If I could take them, I would.

I made good progress on designing my cannons for the Maelstrom.  I would incorporate two cannons, one a standard aether cannon for range and damage, and the other would be an aether disruptor cannon for disabling ships.  I was going to need adamantine to downsize both cannons and contain the large amounts of aether.  I also had not figured out targeting yet.  The Wolfsguard remained on the ships while we were grounded, but everyone else had fun in the strange village.  They were as welcoming of our coin as the halflings had been.  We were well rested when our fleet of five skyships took to the skies.

Gemma was working…well, yelling at the riggers and Wolfsguard on the sails.  Her calm demeanor was now gone as she cursed their slowness to obey her commands.  She was a taskmaster and impressive as she worked her spells and commanded the men.  I think she was trying to prove herself to the other windmages on the Navy ships as she pushed the Night Jewel’s speed.  This was good, as the faster we got there, the better.

The capital city of Malaise was on an inlet of an ocean.  The ocean was larger than anything I had seen so far, thousands of miles across. I could only see the other side as the interior of the Sphere curved upward. It was an impressive city spawl on the ocean and their were more sea-going ships than I had ever seen. Hundreds dotted the harbor and nearby sea. This was obviously a massive trading hub.

Our two Navy escorts handed us off to four smaller skyships about the size of the Maelstrom. Each of these had just a single mast and guided us to a calm inlet to land. As soon as our three ships had landed, Gemma was off the Night Jewel and boarding one of the escort ships. She was probably returning to her own ship.

Two dozen soldiers met me when I descended the ramp. A man in official-looking red robes greeted, “Captain Storme Hardlight, I am Judge Lotus Damon. Captain Volantis messaged ahead about your arrival and said you were in a rush. I am here to inspect the Night Jewel and report to the Adventurer’s Guild regarding the seven-year-old contract.”

“The ship is yours to inspect. Can I keep the aether core crystals on board?” I asked as he looked eager to start.

He stumbled slightly, “Um, let me check.” He pulled out a contract and quickly skimmed it. He looked up, “The contract states the bounty of one hundred thousand gold as long as the ship is air worthy.” He looked up at the ship, “It looks in excellent condition. Normally liberated ships are quite damaged when returned.” He paused, “I will talk with the Prince. Maybe something can be worked out after my inspection.”

One of the soldiers stepped forward, “Captain Storme Highguard, the Prince has prepared a meal and is expecting you.”

I motioned for Bleiz to come with me and talked briefly with Pakkam, Talia, and Leda before leaving. We would keep the comm stones handy in case something arose. The cats were not happy about being left behind again. I told them when they were bigger and perfectly behaved, they could accompany me. The white one, Kiara, sat immediately and wrapped her tentacles. I think she was telling me that she was already well-behaved. Adrial looked confused but eventually mimicked her sister.

I laughed, “Okay, you are both behaved but still not big enough.” I gave each a pet and had Sammie and Lana watch them.

Bleiz was on my hip as the twelve guards escorted us to a waiting carriage. We climbed in to be met with an old man across from us. “Welcome to the Principality. Your return of the Night Jewel in such fabulous condition is a joy to the Prince. It was a gift from the King and he lost a lot of face, losing it shortly after.”

“King? Isn’t the Prince in charge?” I asked. I could not access information on the hundreds of kingdoms in the Sphere. Something else I would have to remedy.

“The Kingdom of Nordin grew too large to be ruled by a single throne. There are five Principalities. Marstom, Arled, Orissia, Toldavia and Wintermoot. A son of the current King rules each at the heart of the Principalities.” He calmly explained the makeup of the kingdom. “Each Principality operates independently and covers huge tracks of the Sphere, much of it wild.” He folded his hands, “Now about the royal protocols…”

The forty-minute ride in the carriage was a crash course in addressing the Prince and etiquette during the meal. The meal was going to be with a dozen of his advisors and was more of a formal thank you. I just hoped he was not going to ask for a discount.

The Principality was wealthy. That much was obvious by the buildings, the volume of trade, and the people. I was already considering asking them for aid in the defense of Skyholme. If not, then at least open trade as that seemed to be at the heart of their prosperity. We reached an immaculate palace of blue and white polished stone. It was larger than Skyhold Citadel on Skyholme, and that structure could hold over ten thousand people.

We were asked to wear only a single non-artificed weapon and complied. Beliz took a few moments removing all the blades he had secreted about his person. The procession into the building was led by soldiers in full metal armor. They must have had muted enchantments because they made muffled sounds as they walked.

The dining hall where we ended was massive. Easily a hundred yards deep and twenty wide. There was also no ceiling, just a shimmering blue aether shield to protect us from light rain misting. Even with the massive size of the room, only a table big enough for ten was set up. Two seats were waiting for us. We followed the decorum, bowed, waited for us to be introduced, and then were seated.

The formalities were done; a dozen servants swarmed the table, pouring wine and placing plate after plate of food. There were no courses, just a help yourself to whatever you preferred from the massive variety. I smiled to myself, knowing that if Freya was here, she would go straight for the desserts. No one touched the food, waiting on the Prince.

The Prince looked middle-aged, and his title, Prince of Marstom, was his name and title according to our brief education in the carriage. I was to address him as just Prince, though. He nodded to everyone present before speaking, “Captain Storme, I did not expect you to be so young. I wanted to thank you in person for returning the Night Jewel. Captain Volantis told me you were in a hurry, so I even invited the local Guildmaster of the Adventuer’s Hall. Once the inspection is completed, we can release the funds,” he smiled and nodded.

“Prince, you are most generous to give me your time and expedite my request.” I nodded and forged on with a plan, “I am in a hurry as the pirate organization, the Black Marauders, threatens my homeland.”

“The Black Maurauders? I heard Maggie the Siren was a member. Was that why you were hunting her? Captain Volantis also said you captured a second pirate ship, the Sky Wraith? That captain was quite infamous, as well as his ship. He also has a sizable bounty.” The Prince was leading something, and I sensed it. He wanted the Sky Wraith! He smiled slightly, “I would be happy to honor that bounty as well and save you the trip of turning the ship over to the Adventruer’s Hall thirty thousand miles from here.”

I was in the Prince’s house, and he was going to bend the conversation to have me turn the Sky Wraith over. I replied patiently, “Prince, unfortunately, as I already mentioned, my homeland will be attacked, and we need ships to defend it. The Sky Wraith is needed. I have the heads of the crew as well as Maggie the Siren to turn in for bounties,” I looked and guessed who was the Guild Master and nodded at him.

“Maggie the Siren is dead?” The Prince sounded surprised. Not angry, just surprised. “I assumed she had fled on her skiffs. This is good news. Please everyone eat before it grows cold.” That caused a frenzy as men and women reached in and started taking what they wanted.

I found something that looked like mini-sliders. I knew I had not invented the cheeseburger, I had just introduced it to Skyholme. The mini-burger had a relish on it, and I took four, and that was all I planned to eat with the wine I was served. The rolls were buttery and matched well with the ground lamb that composed the burger. The relish had a lemony citric flavor to make an overall excellent meal. I was almost tempted to try something else but held back.

Beliz had gone for a whole chicken and was slowly consuming it piece by piece. I finished my food and studied the conversations. There was some back and forth with the Prince at the other end. They were discussing realm business and not my ship. I had really hoped the Prince would have wanted to send aid to Skyhlome to help against the pirates. His Principality seemed to rely on trade, so I thought pirates would be an enemy.

As the meal slowed down, many of the men stuffed their bellies to bursting, the Prince got everyone’s attention again, “I just received word the Night Jewel is in excellent shape.” A chorus of happy voices erupted. “My Judge said you wished to keep the aether crystals on board?” I nodded, holding back a grimace. “It is acceptable, but how about we reduce the compensation to ninety thousand gold for the return of the Night Jewel?”

I bit my tongue as the ship was easily worth three hundred thousand gold if I had sold it elsewhere. I had only come here to offload the slower ship off quickly. I regretted not taking it back to Skyholme, even if it took an extra week. I nodded and smiled, “Prince, it sounds fair.” It was not, but I was in his house.

The Prince smiled, “Excellent. I have never met so agreeable a privateer.”

I returned his smile, “Prince, you never argue with the lord in his own house.” I was steaming on the inside, though.

The Prince laughed, “Oh, young but wise. I am prepared to offer you three hundred thousand gold for the Sky Wraith. With that sum, you can hire many men to defend your kingdom from pirates.”

“Prince, your offer is generous, but I am from the Skyholme Islands. Skyships are the only way to defend my people, and the Sky Wraith is badly needed,” I responded as the Prince frowned. An advisor leaned into and whispered into his ear. The Sky Wraith was maybe worth four hundred and fifty thousand in Skyholme, about a hundred thousand more than a Harbinger. I was unaware of markets outside Skyholme. It could be more or less.

The Prince seemed to consider the stalemate. “Skyholme are floating islands?” I nodded as the advisor had obviously just informed him, about twenty thousand miles from here?”

“Prince, about twenty-three thousand miles. We are just now opening trade with the Sphere after centuries of isolation. A member of the old governing body is organizing the attack. A malicious family that has tried to eliminate others and has been exiled. If they can not have, I believe they are using the Black Mauraders to try and destroy Skyholme instead.” I tried to instill as much passion into my plea but did not think this Prince would be swayed.

An advisor whispered again in his ear, “The portal network does not extend to Skyholme?”

“Prince, it is being reactivated. I am not sure when it will be usable, but free trade begins in fifteen days, and I expect the pirates to use it as a means to get their ships close to Skyholme.” I pleaded a little this time. He seemed interested in the islands, at least.

He had a private conversation with two advisors to his left and right. After addressing me, “Your situation is unfortunate. I will not press you further on the Sky Wraith. The ninety-five thousand will not be subject to the tax,” he nodded to the Guildmaster. “Neither will any bounties paid in my city.” He waited till the Guildmaster nodded in acknowledgment.

The Prince then stood and left. No chance to thank him. Over half the table followed him. Bleiz leaned into me, “He is planning something. I guess he is either secretly allied with the pirates or might be thinking or aiding you. You should have formally requested aide.”

“I do not think he is allied with the pirates,” I surmised. “He definitely is planning something, though. Either he plans to help, or maybe he plans to take the Sky Wraith by force—but that feels unlikely.” I watched the Prince and his Enterouge leave.

The Guildmaster approached me and bowed, “Guildmaster Morcas Merit, at your service, Captain Hardlight. If you will follow me back to the Guild Hall, we can take care of the paperwork and see you on your way. Though you may want to wait for permission from the Prince to leave,” he winked.

We were escorted out of the palace by guards and were soon in the streets. There were dozens of unfamiliar and familiar smells. The city was definitely bustling with people and commerce. The Guild Hall was far down the street; he let us be sightseers as we moved through the crowds. When we entered the blackwood building, fifty men and women looked up and greeted Guildmaster Morcas. We went into his office and sat down.

He sighed long, “I have not eaten that much in ages.” He rubbed his belly. “The Prince is known to set the best table within five thousand miles. That was the only reason why I could think you were returning the Night Jewel,” he laughed.

I chuckled but did not feel it since I had gotten such a poor deal. I asked, “As for the Sky Wraith, will the bounty be canceled?”

The Guildmaster nodded, “Yes, and anyone who made copies of it will find their sheets now blank. As long as there is not a dumb captain out there, you should be able to fly unmolested.” He paused and thought, “Well, when the Black Mauraders find out the ship was taken, they will probably take exception to your ownership.”

“The Sky Wraith will probably find a home in the Islands and not be flying the Sphere. Can you confirm it can not be tracked?” I asked.

His left eyebrow rose in thought, “I think so. That was one of the reasons the bounty was high. All divination efforts had failed to locate it.” That was a relief. Not that it mattered, as the Black Mauraders were already planning to assault Skyholme under the direction of the Bricios.

“I will take care of it right after we handle your individual bounties.” He banged on the wall, and a thin elf with long, silvery gold hair came rushing in. The Guildmaster addressed him, “Keoth, these men are picking up the chest coming from the Prince. They are also presenting bounties,” he looked expectantly at me. I did the gruesome task of removing the heads from my storage.

Keoth was some type of divination mage, and it took a few minutes to confirm the identities of the dead and that the head was genuine. I did not understand the magic but waited patiently. The bounty sums were pretty generous. The Wraith was five thousand gold alone, and his crew doubled that. Then another thousand for Maggie’s head.

“As the Prince said, you are quite young and impressive. I will stamp your Adventurer’s card if you wish.” He said. I handed it to him. He recorded the number of stamps, nine total of gold, but they just counted on my copper card as nine. It was a magic pick that he tapped with an artificed hammer. Nothing spectacular. I now had nine of five hundred holes punched on my Adventurer’s card. Three for Maggie’s ship and six for the Wraith’s ship and crew.

“How will you want your coin?” The Guildmaster asked when he was done with the process.

“Large gold coins,” I said. The Guildmaster had Keoth fetch the coin.

“Will you be seeking any new bounties here?” The Guildmaster asked expectantly.

“No, we will be leaving as soon as the gold is delivered. We hope to return in two days to Skyholme and warn them of the attack.” I said.

“They don’t know? Do you have an Adventurer’s Guild? I can send a message for you.” He leaned forward, expecting a yes. I should have known this was possible. The Adventurer’s Guild had a vast network for exchanging information in the Sphere.

“Please do. Thank you,” I said with relief, “Charge?” I inquired, prepared to pay.

“Not for the message, no. But I expect the Prince is not quite done with you. I suggest you wait a day or two. You may be surprised. I have seen that look on him before. He senses an opportunity. I know he had his heart set on the Sky Wraith, but he will not take it by force of deception,” the Guildmaster was hiding a smile.

I returned to my ship to find the dual aether core stones already removed and packed in a crate for me from the Night Jewel. The chest of one hundred and six thousand large coins was delivered, and the Prince left six of his palace guards near our ships. They were not preventing us from leaving, just remaining as sentries due to the gold. The chest was secured inside my dimensional closet with all the other coins we had collected from the pirate horde. Now the question was, do we wait for the Prince to come to a decision as the Guildmaster advised?