Chapter 136

We were being pursued by another pirate ship.  This one was called the Sky Wraith.  Cilia was on deck on the Night Jewel, and I had the Maelstrom swing close, and I traded places with her using my exchange ability.  The released sailors were working furiously on deck to harness the natural wind in the Sphere.  It would not matter as the ship coming up behind us was smaller and had no sails.  It was a pure skyship, powered only by aether.

I took out my communication stone and set it to transmit with everyone on, “Tell me about this new pirate.”

Leda’s voice came back.  “It is one of the more dangerous pirates in the region. They have aether disruptor cannons from the posting. The cannons will disrupt the aether flow through the runes. These pirates prefer to crash their targets and pick over the wrecks. The only good news is the crew is relatively small, around twenty, according to the bounty sheet.”

I reached the bridge of the Night Jewel to find Leda in the pilot’s chair. She was nervous as she looked up at me, “The Wolfsguard all watching the freed sailors. Do you think we have enough fighters to take the ship?”

Instead of talking to just Leda, I hit my comm stone for everyone to hear, “I am going to try and do the same thing I did to the skiff, damage their control runes.” I turned off the communication stone, “Leda, I need to borrow your spyglass. I want to exchange with a pirate before they come within cannon range. Do you know the range of a disruptor cannon?”

Leda pursed her lips, “About six hundred feet. It is more like a directional wave that quickly dispenses. Two or three hits, and this ship will start to fall from the sky. If they keep firing, the ship could plummet like a rock.”

I explained my plan over the communication stone. “If Maggie the Siren is on that ship, then they are probably aware of my exchange ability. Keep the Maelstrom out of range of their cannons, Cilia. If they ground the Night Jewel, use the communication stones to collect the survivors. I am guessing they are planning to force the Night Jewel to land and not planning to crash it.”

Pakkam’s voice came over the stone, “In battles, you can never assume you know what your opponent will do, High Mage. My fellow Wolfsguard are prepared to go down with the ship.”

That was not entirely true. Leda and Pakkam both had the feather fall ring. They both could carry another person as well. I reminded Leda, “Do not forget you have the ring. If the ship is lost, abandon it and go to the Maelstrom on the ground.” She nodded a little more confidently.

I moved to the deck with the spyglass in hand. The sailors were still trying to capture as much wind in the sails as possible. Pakkam approached me as I looked out at our pursuer. “There are three port and three starboard aether cannons. They are more designed for anti-boarding action. Two large aether cannon are built into the bow, but I do not suggest firing them. We would likely miss, and it would waste aether.”

I nodded as I looked through the spyglass. The Sky Wraith was the same black hull as the Night Jewel. Maybe it was the theme for this pirate organization. No sails were visible, but it looked like a sloop. Twice the size of the Maelstrom, with two lower decks indicated by the portholes showing. There were two forward protrusions on the bow. I assumed that must be their aether cannons.

There were less than twenty pirates on the open deck of the ship.  They wore an array of outfits and armor, and I think Maggie the Siren was among them.  They were still too far away to be sure, though.  I caught reflections in the air around them.  They had some powerful aether shields protecting them to reflect the light.  It would take a tier four aether shield or a tier three anti-teleport array to prevent me from using my ability. If I could not use my ability, this would be a messy fight.

I switched my focused view to the lower deck portholes.  Two were open, and I could see movement inside the darkness.  I was not sure how much of a person that I needed to make an exchange.  I turned to Pakkam, “I am going to try going below deck.  The pirate that appears in my place—tie him up and keep him visible.  That way, I can return if needed.”

Pakkam nodded and asked, “What do you want us to do with the sailors?  Keep them working?”

“Yes.  They are doing a good job.  Promise them a few gold if it keeps them working through the attack,” I advised.  Economics varied from city to city, but gold was gold, and hopefully, it would be enough to keep them motivated.

I did my prep work, four flash-bang alarm stones in one hand with my falchion in the other.  I cast invisibility over myself and then held up the spyglass with the hand with the stones.  I went into overdrive mode with lightning reflexes and cast my aether shield to cover my body. I identified movement and channeled my ability.  I immediately knew I had made an error.  The use of the ability took nearly half my aether pool.  Not only was the distance a few miles, using more aether, but they also had a lesser anti-teleport array going that cost me more aether to overcome.  I still succeeded.

I was inside the hull of the Sky Wraith.  A strong musk scent hit me first.  There were a dozen pirates anxious for a fight, but they did not see me, or apparently every know their companion vanished.  They were all human except for a single golden-haired male elf who had his hair tied into a ponytail.

I stepped to the right and sent my metal sense into the aether cannon.  It had unfamiliar runes, and my first impression was the cannon was made to disrupt and dissipate aether.  I would want to study these runes in the future.

I was on the starboard side and quickly fused the runes so the cannon would fire.  “Where is Gildo?”  Someone asked.  “Gildo, what dragon are you fucking now!  You are supposed to be at the pothole and relaying info to us!”  It looked like the group was ready to rush up on deck at a signal from this Gildo.

I moved to the port side unnoticed and disabled the other cannon. The entire group was now looking around the lower deck, confused. A feminine shout came from above, “Gildo is on the Night Jewel! That bastard is below deck!” The air suddenly got extremely tense, and someone threw a bag of white power that quickly expanded into a cloud.

I felt my invisibility melt away, dispelled, and eleven pairs of eyes locked onto me. I had hoped to make my way to the stern and damage the flight controls, but now I had eleven angry pirates in my way. And two more bounded down the stairs. One of them was an angry Maggie the Siren. “He is fast! Be careful!” She bellowed hoarsely.

I did not have a view of the Maelstrom to escape, so I was going to have to fight. I threw all four stones at the group. Three went off a heartbeat later, blinding the pirates. I rushed into the number, cutting into between the ribs of a pirate and pushing him into his companions. The gap allowed me to get behind the group. Only Maggie was tracking my movements, as she must have had a defense against the flash.

I kept pirates blinded pirates between Maggie and me as I slashed and stabbed in their midst. My overdrive speed made it impossible for the blind pirates to keep up. Body after body hit the floor, and Maggie yelled up, “Wraith! I need help down here!!! Now!!” The few deafened pirates that could hear Maggie only caused panic as they began to swing wildly amongst their comrades. I used the opportunity to exit the door and quickly cast arcane lock on it as I shut it behind me.

A surprised young boy poked his head out of a room and quickly slammed it shut and I heard it lock. I walked quickly down the narrow hallway looking at the doors. I needed to find the aether core room. It might be down one more deck. I checked each of the four doors I could open and they were all storage or bunk rooms.

Maggie the Siren had a pirate hacking at the door with an axe. The last door was where the boy had disappeared. I started using my lightning spear on the area around the lock. After a dozen casts, I was getting close. A large section of the door collapsed through the forward hold. A massive spear of ice slammed into me, throwing me down the corridor.

My aether shield expired, and I was dazed for a moment. The head of a black-skinned lizard man was staring at me. I assumed this was Wraith. I fired off a series of arcane webs to block the door and passage. A frustrated howl reverberated as news was relayed to Wraith that the aether cannons were not working. I smirked as I kicked in the door.

Bingo. This was their aether core room. Panels with aetheric runes lined both sides of a center wall. It was definitely good work, and there was even some aether technology mixed in. The boy came at me with a dagger from the left, thinking he could surprise me. I backhanded him, sending him sprawling. I shut the door behind me and cast an arcane lock on the door. Then I coated the boy in an arcane web spell. He started swearing and struggling but had no chance of freeing himself.

I raced through the panels, figuring out the runes. The aether crystal was the same size as the Night Jewel—the exact same size. Maybe they came from the same dungeon? No time to dwell on this right now. I went up and down the narrow space and chose my action plan. I disconnected the four gravity runes in rapid succession. Like most skyships, there were multiple layers of backups, but all I had to do was cut power to each runic array. I immediately felt the centrifugal forces, was thrown into a wall, and grunted from the impact. I cast an arcane web and used it to climb to get my next target.

It was the pitch control. I activated the pitch, and the sloop-sized skyship went into a roll. I had to hold on or risk being thrown around a little faster than I had planned. In my mind, I pictured everyone up on the deck being thrown off the ship, like a dog shaking itself free of water. The pirates in the forward hull could be heard screaming and cursing. There had been crates of goods in there, and the sounds of crashing and thudding throughout the ship must have upset the pirates—the ones still on board. I did not have any port holes to look out so I was trying to feel gravity to get an idea of how many rotations the ship was taking.

After what I thought was six full turns, I crawled along my web and connected the runes to stop the roll. There must have been someone still in the pilot’s chair as the ship stabilized quickly. I connected just one of the gravity runes before going and seeing what havoc I had wrought on the Sky Wraith’s crew. I pulled my communication stone and asked, “Pakkam, how does it look from your point of view out there?”

A hoarse laughter came through the stone, “High Mage, I have never seen the like. There appear to be four pirates on deck, two flying and trying to catch up to the ship, and the rest are taking the shortcut to the lowlands.”

“Great. I am going to need some help over here. My aether core is almost empty, and there are maybe ten pirates below deck. They should be shaken and injured. I am in the aether core room with a boy from the pirates.” I turned and renewed the arcane web holding the struggling boy before the strands dissolved.

Pakkam replied, “Looks like they are turning around to go pick up the two flyers behind you.”

I watched over and found the runes for the steering and cut them and the backups. “They should only be able to go in a straight line now. Have Leda come alongside and board us. Call in the Maelstrom to help as well. I will go see how the pirates below deck are doing.” I placed the stone away and exited the control room. Down the corridor, my arcane web strands were dissolving as the black-skinned lizard was trying to fee himself. Beyond him, men were groaning and whining. I rushed forward and attacked the lizard man, Wraith.

I was stunned when my sword flashed on impact, and sparks flew. It was not an aether shield but some type of ability. Was he immune to attacks? That was like a tier three or tier four ability. He hissed at me as he cast his massive ice bolt, the size of a man. I easily sidestepped the disoriented pirate and tried to remove his extended hand. The flash occurred again, and I heard his wrist snap and break. So it was just his skin that was immune to attacks. He had innate healing too, as the wrist immediately snapped back into place.

I switched to my staff and pummeled his face over and over again. Breaking his facial bones and pushing them into his brain. I was too fast with my enhanced speed for him to defend himself, and soon, a bloody and gory faceless lizardman remained. A few pirates were moving on the other side of the door, Maggie the Siren among them. I cast four arcane webs through the door to slow them down and found myself out of the aether.

I was a bit shocked, but I had been in overdrive for quite some time, and the exchange ability had used a lot of my aether. The body of Wraith blocked my access to the room. The entire ship shuddered as the Night Jewel slammed abreast. I could hear the Wolfsguard enter combat above deck.

Without my spells, I did not want to risk entering the fight. I doubted they needed much help anyway. I wished I had kept one or two minor aether restorative potions. The fighting was soon joined by the delve team from the Maelstrom. Ten minutes later, the pirates in the hold surrendered. We had Maggie the Siren, five pirates, and the boy still alive. Pakkam had them tied and aether restraints put on. The Night Jewel had a number of harnesses that restricted a person’s aether access for taking prisoners to sell into slavery. The two flyers had wisely fled to the lowlands when they noticed they had no chance. A few of the pirates flung off the ship may have survived if they had a device like the feather fall rings.

I was up on the deck of the Night Wraith. The remaining pirates were all lined up. Maggie’s eyes were furious, but she was gagged and collared. All three ships were tied together and making their way through the skies. We were flying the neutral prize flags, so hopefully, no one would attack us.

Leda held up the bounties, “I only hold a bounty for Maggie the Siren. None of these others,” she pointed to the five pirates and the boy, “are worth turning in.”

I looked at the pirates and then at Pakkam and nodded. He removed their harnesses, blocking their aether one at a time, and tossed them overboard. We were a few miles up. They all struggled because they had been stripped of all artifacts. When he got to the last one, the boy, Pakkam, looked at me.

I shook my head, no. “He was inside the ship and was not prepared to fight. We will hand him over with Maggie.”

“We are going to turn in the Night Jewel to the Principality of Marstom for the 100,000 gold bounty.” Maggie struggled on her bonds, but I just turned to her, “Your reward is 1,000 dead or alive, your choice.” Her glare chilled me a little, and I was going to leave her guarded by two Wolfsguard at all times.

Cilia asked urgently, “What about warning Skyholme about the Bricio plot?”

“I already considered this. We will still arrive a week before the planned attack. The Sky Wraith can serve as my required ship for the Triumvirate. Although the Night Jewel is massive, it is hard to sail and an aether hog. The pirates did us a favor, giving us an alternative.” I smiled at my companions like I had planned this all along.

“The bounty for the Sky Wraith is 250,000 gold, Storme,” Leda noted.

I waved it off. I was stretched for coin, but with the aether cores we were obtaining from these pirate ships, one of my largest purchases would be taken care of. The coin from the Night Jewel bounty would complete the construction of the Wolfsguard village. I turned to Bleiz, “Bleiz, can you question Maggie about what she knows about the planned attack on Skyholme? Also, find out how she tracked us and if anyone else will be coming after us.” He nodded knowingly. Bleiz hauled away Maggie, and Neoma followed to assist.

With Bleiz gone, I started giving orders. “The Wolfsguard are responsible for the prisoners, sailors, and the captives. Cilia will pilot the Maelstrom. I will pilot the Sky Wraith. Leda will pilot the Night Jewel and serve as point. Lana and Sammie get an inventory of all the cargo from the two captured ships. Namira, Zinnia, and Talia; you will inventory any coin and artificed devices on the ships.” Everyone hurried to their tasks. We would keep the ships tied together for a few hours so everyone could get their tasks started.

Who said pirate hunting was dangerous? Now, I just had to hope no one else decided to stop us on our way to the Principality of Marstom. Hopefully, three ships flying together would keep everyone fearful of us.