Chapter 154

I settled into the pilot’s seat of the Silent Gloom.  Everything was standard for flight controls of a skyship—I just needed to get a feel for the control’s sensitivity.  Additional controls were tied into the ship’s aether crystal, but none were labeled.  I assumed shields and aether cannon controls were somewhere in their number, but I did not have time to figure out what did what at the moment.

I used my communication stone and told Leda, “Leda, I am picking people up at the Shiny Platinum in moments.  I am on board a ship called the Silent Doom.  It is about one hundred and twenty feet in length with three masts.  Gareth will be on the deck with his delve team.”  I gave her as much information as possible to identify the ship, trusting she would get the information to Callem or Sebastian for me so we would not be mistakenly attacked.

As I tested the controls, I soon learned why this ship landed in the docks rather than taking a defensive position above the city with most other pirate combat ships.  Its primary aether core was almost drained.  The gauge on my panel showed it at about ten percent capacity with no visible charge rate.

I did not know how much flight time the ten percent charge would give me, but I planned not to use any other aetheric devices on the ship—not that any of them were clearly labeled on these controls. It was the same on the Maelstrom; none of the controls had been marked. I could spend minutes sensing out the runes and runic connections with my metal shaping skill, but there was no time.

I looked to the skies one last time before taking off.  I do not think anyone noticed the quick takeover of the Silent Gloom.  They were more concerned with preventing the Wasps from interfering with their takeover of the city.  It looked like no ships were descending on my position, in fact, most of the other pirate skyships were rapidly taking off as the Sadians emerged in numbers on the streets near the Shiny Platinum.

I got comfortable in the chair and activated the anti-gravity runes. I powered the ship toward the Shiny Platinum, keeping close to the ground.  The ship was more sluggish than I had hoped.  I used the stone to tell Remy to have everyone ready to board from my parent’s apartment balcony.  I landed in the plaza near the giant hydra mural, hugging the building.

The ship groaned and tilted as it was made to land in water and not on a flat surface.  I let the ship settle anyway, and it tilted fifteen degrees as I went on deck.  I was right under the balcony, the bow sticking out into the street. Rope ladders had already descended, and Gareth was helping people down on the deck.  The Sadians were fighting in the street nearby.

Lord Antioch was on my right as I watched, “This is a feint.  These pirates are mostly mercenaries and pillagers.  The Black Mauraders have powerful mages and some of the strongest fighters in the Sphere.”  He gestured to the Sadians fighting, “These are the lesser of their number.” I nodded and remembered the mercenary ship of women I had visited during my attempt to slow the invasion.

My mother was one of the first to board, and she looked around worriedly.  Wynna dropped, and then Remy.  Remy came to me, “Storme, we should take the children.”

I looked up at the pirate fleet above, “We don’t have time.  They are probably safer here anyway.”  My pronouncement was hollow, as the fighting was extremely intense in the upper city.  Explosions could be heard, and flashes from spells were noticeable. Once the reinforcements from the Sadian army came in half a day, things would stabilize, but until then, things would be dangerous.

“With you and Gareth’s team leaving, they don’t think so,” Remy replied quickly, trying to convince me.  I looked over the rails, and there were about a hundred women and children waiting for my decision.

My mother spoke, “Let them on board, Storme.  You came to save me? Then save them, too. Get them to safety away from here.”

I groaned inwardly but nodded at my mother. Prince Antioch was grinning, “It is great to be part of such a noble endeavor, High Mage. Adventure and heroism are so hard to come by counting coins.”

A steady flow of children, mothers, and elderly began to land on the deck, helped down by Gareth’s team. I went to the pilot’s chair and confirmed which controls were for the aetheric shielding by sending out my metal shaping senses. When the deck was packed and the balcony empty, I righted the ship and took to the skies.

The added mass was not welcome, as the sluggish Silent Gloom was even less responsive. I planned to stay close to the ground, make my way to the edge of the island, and then follow it to Solaris City. Remy alerted me that a pirate ship had peeled away from the fleet above and was coming for us. Of course, they were.

I activated the aetheric shielding and pushed the Gloom as fast as it would go. While clearing the island, I dropped below and was happy to see two Wasp ships hovering close by. One fired on us, causing the aetheric shield to flash and drawing away precious aether from the ship’s aether crystal to maintain the shield.

Screams of fear erupted from my passengers. Remy altered me, “They realized their mistake and are engaging the pirate ship that was coming to check on us. I think we are clear.”

I frowned as the ship was down to about eight percent of its charge. I deactivated the shielding, hoping that Remy was correct. Normally, for a ship this large, I would have spotters fore and aft. I focused on hugging the underside of Titan’s Shield as I raced toward the island’s far end. The underside of the massive island looked like a massive sea of bulbous rocks. The darkness made our black ship have some natural stealth.

When I reached the other end of the island half an hour later, I emerged into the Sphere’s light and took the ship back to the top side of the island with extreme caution. Remy noted four pirate ships—then five more. They all appeared over Solaris City, and none were near Hen’s Hollow. Still, I stayed on plan and headed toward Twin Rock Lake. The Lake was near the edge of the island, and we managed to land unseen by the ships over the city miles away. I nestled the ship close to shore with some trees overhead and cut aether to the runes. About seven percent charge was left.

I stepped onto the deck of the confused people. “We are on the south end of the island. Traveling the open distance to another island is too dangerous. Stay here and scatter into the woods if the Mauraders spot the ship.”

The Maelstrom zipped overhead and landed on the other side of the two massive rocks I had fished at so many times before. Rippon had started the repairs, but she still looked in rough shape. “Mother, Wynna, Ennet, and Remy come. I will take you all to the Black Spire.”

They all looked at each other, and Wynna spoke for them, “We will stay with them. We will bring them to Callem’s farm.” She stood resolutely, and I shook my head. I had to bring news to Freya that our father was likely dead, and if I failed to rescue our mother as well, she would never forgive me.

Prince Antioch offered, “I will stay with them.” He indicated he still had his two guards as well. I nodded and did not want to argue with them.

Gareth came up to me and clasped our wrists, “Thanks, Storme. I will go and make sure the twins are safe as well. I will take them and their parents to Callem’s farm.” He nodded to me before leaping over the side into the waist-deep water with his delve team loyally following him.

Bleiz had come down the ramp with all fifteen of my own delvers led by Talia. I had not asked them to come and help. Instead of landing in the water, I used my aether shield discs to walk to shore. Bleiz approached with his wolfish smile, “Thought you could use a hand.”

Talia stepped forward, “Everyone insisted on coming. The Duskhunters have the Spire secured, and Relik said no one would get anywhere near the Sire. What do you need us to do?”

“Protect the people,” seeing Cilia and Leda at the top of the ramp, I motioned them down. “I got a new skyship. Cilia, you are her new captain. Get her cleaned out and think of a better name. Leda, stay with her. If things look bleak,” I held up the communication stone, “Get everyone the lowlands on the ship. There is a Sadian Prince around here somewhere. Take them to Goldreach.”

As she passed, Cilia handed me a communication stone, “Admiral Sebastian has the sister stone.” I nodded thanks. Sebastian was her grandfather as was probably busy.

I thought they would resist leaving the Maelstrom at this moment, but they just descended the ramp and went to the floating skyship. “Bleiz, you are with me,” I climbed the ramp. I would have left Bleiz behind to protect my mother, but with my entire delve team here, I decided it was enough. We still had not seen the Sky King or the Bricios.

I took a seat on the bridge of the Maelstrom and slowly exhaled. “It is okay to cry, you know,” Bleiz said at my side. “You lost your father.”

“Maybe later, Bleiz. Right now, let’s get back to the Spire.” I took the Maelstrom straight to Solaris City to get a look at what was happening there. We flew over Hen’s Hollow, and there was no one in sight—people or pirates. That was good for the residents and the twins. The small farming communities probably had nothing of value for the raiders.

The city was smoking in a dozen places, and some fires were visible. I veered away as the overwatch pirate ships tried to intercept us. Bleiz studied the city as we passed. “It looks like they are looting the merchant district and controlling most of the city.”

I took out the stone and contacted Admiral Sebastian. His weary voice came across, “Yes, Cila? I am quite busy.”

“Cilia gave me her stone, Admiral. She is outside Solaris City, and I gave her the ship I took from the pirates.” My voice came out dry and devoid of emotion.

Sebastian paused before talking, “I am sorry the Leaping Frog fired on the ship. Not all our skyships have long-distance communication stones.”

“We had our aether shields up. We survived, and they realized their mistake quickly. We just flew over Solaris City. It looks like it has fallen. The Sadians are going to help us retake the Aegis City, and I evacuated the Shiny Platinum of women and children. What other news?”

A pause before he replied, “Eight hours. We have the response fleet on the ground but are waiting eight hours to ensure the ships have enough aether in their cores to be effective.” I understood his dilemma. Skyship in combat drew a lot of aether and drained their cores quickly. “We are hoping to catch the pirates low on aether.”

“What about the Bricios?” I asked.

“None of the scouts have seen them. The Sky King’s ship, The Shadow Vulture, has not been seen either. There have been no attacks on the capital, but the Black Mauraders are close to controlling three of the islands,” Sebastian said heavily.

Callem’s voice came across, “Do not worry, Storme. We have five thousand men and woman volunteers ready to join the Navy for the fight. Every city that has been attacked will be retaken in a day.”

“What have the delving guilds been doing?” I asked. They were probably our most seasoned fighters on the islands.

“Most of the guilds are helping. Some wanted payment guarantees that Loriel was not willing to approve. The requests were outrageous,” Callem said angrily.

“I am going to the Black Spire to rest. Let me know when you are about to start your assault. I will help however I can,” I said, ending the conversation.

I landed minutes later at the Spire, where the Wolfsguard and Duskhunters patrolled the grounds on the fourth floor. The Sky Wraith was crewed and ready to take off as well. As soon as the Maelstrom landed, Rippon was out of the tower to continue with the repairs. Kiara and Adrial rushed me as well, purring loudly in greeting. It was like they knew I had been in danger.

Freya tackled me as well, her face already a mess from crying. I held her as she cried while people worked around us. Then I scooped her up. “Mother is at Callem’s farm and is safe, Freya.” I did not mention our father, but the docks had been such a mess I doubted anyone could have survived. And by her tears, it looked like she already knew.

I brought her to our suite, set her in her bed, and had Monty cuddle with her. I told the cats, “Stay with Freya and protect her.” Kiara tilted her white head and then jumped up on the bed and sat on her hindquarters on alert. Adrial looked at her sister and then at me before jumping up on the desk in the room to take the same posture. I pulled out bowls of cubed chicken for them and placed them in front of each, giving them a quick scratch. Maybe they did understand me a little.

I retreated to my own room to sleep. “Bleiz, wake me if I am needed,” I told the Wolfsguard as I closed the door.

My sleep was restless but undisturbed by anything but my own nightmares of my failures. I was already blaming myself for not doing more to prevent the attack and save my father. Maybe if I had gotten the adamantine and made a powerful aether cannon for the Maelstrom, I could have turned the tide and saved lives.

Bleiz woke me after six hours of sporadic sleep. He had a tray of food for me to eat, and I ate numbly as he talked, “Skyholme has lost five Harbingers and six Wasps. Twice that number have been damaged. The fleet is assembling south of the capital, and Sebastian says they will be launching in an hour.”

“Thank you. How is Freya?” I asked.

“Checked on her a few minutes ago—still sleeping,” Bleiz said. “Am I going with you?”

“Yes, I am just going to talk with Relik, and then we will be taking off,” I finished the food, not tasting it, and checked my aether core—about eighty percent capacity.

Relik was on the fourth floor, which was circled by glass windows. He was playing cards with his delve team. He looked up, “The waiting is the hardest part, Storme. Rest assured, we will be ready and handle the trouble when it arrives.”

“Thank you, Relik. I wanted to ask you a favor,” he nodded slowly. “If something happens to me, make sure Freya is taken care of.” He nodded slowly, agreeing.

“I didn’t realize we were this close, but I agree,” we shook on it. And I left.

Beliz considered me as we walked to the Maelstrom, “Huh, thought you would have given me that order.”

“Well, if you live and I do not, I pass your bond to Freya,” I said.

He barked a laugh, “It does not work that way, but I will watch your sister if you fall, Storme. Can we not talk about it like it is inevitable, though?”

I put on a half smile, “Fine, let us go kill some pirates.”

Rippon was still working on the Maelstrom and boarded with us. He shrugged and crossed his arms, “Not done with the repairs yet. Guess I have to go with you.” I smiled at the old man and nodded.

The Maelstrom was soon in the air and zipped to south of the capital. Dozens of skyships were heard in the lower city docks. Most were packed with civilians armed and armored, ready to take the fight to the Black Mauraders. These were all the privately owned skyships ready to help in the fight. I was surprised to see so many. I would have thought most would have fled to the lowlands.

I landed next to a Harbinger and walked to greet the captain. He was responsible for leading all these ships to land on Titan’s Shiled south of Aegis City. They were still preparing for the assault. I waited on the Maelstrom, trying to figure out what role I would be playing in the fight. Bleiz could fly the Maelstrom again if needed. He could not do it very well, but he could.

I joked that he had progressed from crashing to landing. I reviewed the controls with him and explained how I approached landings. It was mostly about getting a touch for the deceleration. Finally, a horn sounded to signal the fleet was take to the sky.

The Skyholme armada had over three hundred skyships rising from the city docks and south of the city. This was maybe half of all the skyships in Skyholme. The people had actually come together to defend the islands. I couldn’t see the merchant houses putting their ships at the disposal of the Triumvirate before Loriel without being ordered. Maybe she was doing something right? I even saw her own ship among the fleet, the old Harbinger Heaven’s Reach, packed with civilian fighters.

As we moved out into the open sky, I thought this would be the perfect time for the Bricios to attack with the rest of the Mauraders. I was not the only one, and the mode was extremely tense. As we approached the island in the distance, a pair of Wasps joined our impressive fleet. They had been scouting the enemy. About forty pirate ships floated over the city, and more were taking to the air. Did that mean the Sadians had failed to rout them out?

Our impressive fleet should have scared them off. They should have been fleeing. Bleiz voiced my own thoughts, “Seems like they should be running away now,”

“I agree. They must be expecting reinforcements.” The Maelstrom was so much faster than other ships that I decided to scout. I moved the Maelstrom wide of the fleet to buzz under the island and come up on the other side. Passing under the island we did not see anything and emerging on the other side, there was no hidden fleet waiting to pounce. It made no sense.

I picked up my communication stone for Sebastian and activated it, “Admiral, are you going to attack?”

I waited for a moment, “Yes, we are trying to land in three waves based on varying ship speeds. The first wave is moving forward now.” I watched as the skyships and airships started to separate themselves. Sebastian continued, “Storme, what are you planning to do in this engag…”

His voice had suddenly cut off. “Sebastian, are you still there?” No response. I took my communication, opened all eight channels, and spoke, “Is anyone listening?”

Bleiz looked at me and took out his communication stone, “Storme…it didn’t work.”

I spun the Maelstrom around and made the best speed toward the capital island. As we approached from the distance, I could already see little black spots appearing over the capital island. The Black Mauraders had more ships and arrived to attack the capital.