Chapter 97 (Arc 3, Chapter 1) The Maelstrom

The completed skyship sat in the hanger.  I stood next to Rippon and Remy, who was beaming at the ship.  It was a work of art based on the original Wind Splitter schematics.  I had used most of the mithril for the artificing, and the ship was capable of a self-contained environment for up to twelve people.  If the aether didn’t run out, it could function as a submarine, skyship, or spaceship.  The inertia sink was strong enough to accelerate around 20 miles/sec.  The top speed within the Sphere should be around 2,000 mph.  It could travel at higher speeds, but then the wind resistance, hull stress, and inertia sink would start to draw aether exponentially.

The Maelstrom itself looked like a flattened copper teardrop with six retractable landing gear legs, two short V-wings, and a fin top aft.  Aerodynamics would not play a role in its aether-fueled flight, but the wings and fin added an aesthetic and stabilization if the ship lost power.  The wings also added bouncy when the ship was in the water.

The legs were self-contained, so the ship could float on water if needed.  A cargo ramp similar to the Wind Splitter descended rear aft.  The cargo bay was oval, sixty feet deep, and twenty-eight feet wide and took up the entire lower deck.  The second level had a large central room encompassed by a hallway. The central room had all the runic enchantments and housing for the ship’s primary aether crystal power core.  The bridge and navigation were forward with runic-hardened one-way viewing glass.  One large cabin and seven small cabins surrounded the central room.  There was also a top hatch to give access to the top of the skyship if the ship was floating in the water.

The ship’s exterior was coated in runic copper like the Wind Splitter, but I added some camouflage and invisibility runes into the copper plating.  The problem with the invisibility runes was the amount of aether they drew from the power core.  The faster the ship was flying, the more power it would draw to remain invisible.  The ship had a four-layered aether shield, lighting and fire sinks, and additional aether wind shields forward, port, and starboard for additional defenses.

For weapons, I was still learning how to do the rune script for aether cannons.  I had recently obtained a number of texts from Sebastian, so I was still working on perfecting them.  There were many variations of the aether cannon, so I would have to decide what to use when the time was ready.

My crew consisted of Cilia and Leda as my pilot and navigator.  Loriel had ended their commission so they could join my crew as promised.  I was surprised that Remy wanted to join the crew as the engineer as he didn’t seem adventurous.  Bleiz, Gareth, and Sammie were my soldiers, although everyone in the crew was a capable fighter.  Ullmark had decided to remain in Skyholme and develop a new delve team with Talia.  The restaurant and bakery still needed to be supplied with lots of honey.  Mera and Fera would run the Shiny Platinum for me with my sister Freya.  The restaurant revenues had stabilized down slightly but yielded a decent weekly profit.

Rippon spoke, “Shame about the small core.” I nodded.  I had only been able to obtain two blue aether shards salvaged from a crashed Harbinger warship.  Sebastian had sold them to me slightly below market value, but they were shards of a larger crystal and barely enough to power all the runes on the Maelstrom.  It was the best I could do since all the decent large aether crystal cores were being held for the fleet of Wasp-class ships Sebastian was rushing to build.

“Yeah, maybe I can purchase something in the lowlands.  The worst part about those tandem crystals is their slow natural recharge rate. I tested them last week, and it takes twice as long to recharge naturally as a completely natural crystal.  I also think Sebastian pulled a fast one on me, not telling me about the imperfections in the crystals,”  I grumbled. That was not true. Any crystal that was shattered was bound to have numerous imperfections. I just had not checked before purchasing them. They were still the best option available to me to power the ship.

Remy chuckled, “Maybe, but at least you made up some ground on the other materials. He only charged you half what they were worth!  Hell, we have almost enough here to frame out another ship.”

Rippon held up his hands, “I’m done!  This ship was a project of love for me.  Now that this beauty is finished, I can die happy.”

Remy sighed, “So you do not plan to build the frame for the one-person cart?” I flashed a glance at Rippon as well. The one-person cart concept was a mini-skyship—a hoverbike. I convinced Rippon that I could miniaturize most of the runes to make the concept work. I had enough leftover mithril to make two such contraptions, and Remy had designed them, and Isla had ordered the materials. I helped refine Remy’s vision to make them cosmetically sleek. They could be used as mini-lifeboats for three people each if needed.

Rippon laughed, “Yes, Remy. I promised you I would shape the frame for you. I still have a few walls left on the Maelstrom, but I will work on the cart for you afterward. Not sure what utility it would have other than replacing a perfectly good horse, though.”

“Depends on how fast I can make them and how powerful the anti-gravity runes are,” I responded.

 “Waste of good mithril. And all the runes would have to be mithril for the amount of aether that would need to be pumped through them and how small they would have to be,” Rippon grumbled.

Isla and Loriel walked into the hangar, and I offered a false smile. Loriel had four Wolfguard and four human guards trailing behind her. I was surprised not to see Bylura. I had been expecting them. The leader of Skyholme was visiting all the islands to get ready for the election of the third seat of the Triumvirate, who would be taking over the Brico family duties. It would be a seven-year appointment, so each election was extremely important.

I could not vote as you had to be at least 14 years old, and my 14th birthday was still two months away. I asked, “How is your publicity tour going?” Loriel’s face soured at the remark. I had accused her of promoting her desired candidate for the position and not making it an unbiased and fair election.

“It is important that people vote for who they think can best represent their interests. This elected official is going to be in charge of assigning magistrates and overseeing all the academies,” she bit back.

It seemed whether we met, it had turned into a verbal match. I looked behind her, “I do not have time to debate. Do you have your envoy here? We are scheduled to leave tomorrow evening.” She looked away from me and up at the Maelstrom. It was an amazing ship with how many runes I had inscribed on it.

“Bylura and Lucian Torrent will be here soon,” she smirked at my surprise. “Yes, Bylura is an envoy as well. Lucian was selected by Arundel personally. I approve of the selection as he is wise and has the best interest of Skyholme. It was also the only way for the Trivumverate to approve the expedition.”

The last was a jab at me. I had refused to do a covert operation, so Loriel had to get the other member of the Triumvirate, Arundel Torrent, to approve of the mission. It had not been easy, but Loriel eventually got him to approve with the caveat he selected the envoy. I was sure Bylura’s inclusion was a compromise.

“Well, we don’t have ambassador quarters on my little ship, so we plan to set up an office in the cargo hold for them. The trip is only three hours, so they should be fine,” I said with some humor.

Loriel pursed her lips, “Do I get a tour of your skyship?” Thankfully at that moment, Cilia came down the ramp, and I handed off Loriel to her for a tour.

I walked to the restaurant with Rippon and Remy. We found six Wolguard and seven naval personnel in the room. Loriel was traveling with a large entourage. We ended up eating in the kitchen. Bleiz walked out of the hallway, probably just ending his invisibility. He explained, “Freya had four hours of lessons with her tutors. I had nothing to do until then, and Monty was harassing me anyway.”

I cooked the four of us a feast. Gareth was off on a dungeon delve with the team. He had spent every day in one dungeon or another under Ullmark’s guidance. Sammie and Talia were becoming skilled delvers, and Lana was a suitable porter. The team had lost Gimble, Aelyn, and myself but was still producing enough loot to cover their salaries.

Ullmark was in the process of vetting and trying out seven new delvers as well. Each delve, they brought a new candidate with them. Any new members would get paid just two gold per delve, but Ullmark planned to do two weekly delves, so the four gold a week was great compensation. None of the new delvers would get a room at the Shiny Platinum, but all meals were covered.

I told Ullmark as long as it was profitable, he could keep expanding the team.

After the meal, I went up to my room to study. I was no longer studying spells but focused on the maps of the lowlands and learning as much as I could about the city of Llorth. Llorth was 10,200 miles from the capital city of the Sadian Empire, Goldreach. That would be about a six-hour trip in the Maelstrom. I planned to drop off the envoys and then visit Llorth—hopefully find and talk with Aelyn and then swing back to pick up the envoys. My dual-blue aether crystal core could only run the Maelstrom for five hours before taking nearly thirty hours to recharge.

Gareth and Bleiz were the only two who were aware of my plans. I trusted Cila and Leda, but they might accidentally tell Loriel my plans. I wanted answers from Aelyn. The Heart Stone was probably long gone, but so were the mithril chains. I had copied all the runes from the chains into a large tomb before co-opting the mithril for the Maelstrom.

I opened my dimensional closet, and it was almost a seventeen-foot cube and still growing with my aether core. I briefly admired the layout. The first floor was now extremely orderly. The three bookshelves line the three walls. The shelf on the right contained an assortment of spellbooks, dungeon books, and references for the lowland kingdoms and cities. The Sphere was so vast that my reference material was grossly inadequate, and much of it was probably highly outdated.

In the center of the room were my weapon racks. I had two dozen staffs, and an assortment of blades, knives, and daggers. The shelf on the left was a pantry with an array of ingredients and an aether refrigerator unit. I had enough food to last maybe five months. The third shelf on the back wall had many items—things from my youth, figurines, trays of coins, dozens of bottles of mead and ale made by Mera. Two large casks of water with spigots bookended the shelf. I walked into the space and closed the opening behind me. I walked up the steps to the second level.

The second floor had a kitchen, bedroom and desk, and comfy chair to study in. The floor was covered in a plush carpet. I had three blanket chests full of bed linens and pillows. Two armoires and one burrow contained a huge variety of clothes. One massive trunk contained all my adventuring gear. The large bed had the best mattress money could buy with soft linen sheets. The desk was covered in more maps of the lowlands. The borders were suspect as the empires, kingdoms, and nations were in flux. Nothing was safe in the Sphere. For instance, a tier 7 monster could wipe out entire cities.

I pulled picked up the spellbook on the end table, personal invisibility. I had purchased two copies of this spell. One was a dungeon copy which should make it easier to learn—the second had a number of evolutions detailed in it. Spellbooks rewarded as prizes in dungeons were precious as they made learning the spell easier. The downside was they crumbled to dust after they were used. They also didn’t detail the evolutions for a spell, forcing the mage to get creative.

My spell matrix was currently sitting at thirty four, giving me nine available spell slots. The number of spell slots required to imprint a spell doubled for every tier. The chart looked like this:

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| --- | --- |
| Spell Tier | Spell Slots |
| 1 | 1 |
| 2 | 2 |
| 3 | 4 |
| 4 | 8 |
| 5 | 16 |
| 6 | 32 |
| 7 | 64 |

One way to reduce this cost was through a strong affinity in the magic skill. If you had an affinity at tier 2 it reduces a spell’s cost by an entire tier. With a tier 2 affinity in lightning magic I could reduce the tier 4 and lower spells in that sphere by one tier. My tier 4 affinity with the healing sphere allowed me to reduce spells up to tier 5 by two tiers. So if I could find a tier 5 healing spell, I could imprint it for the cost of just 4 spell slots on my aether matrix.

What I wanted to learn was a high-tier spell, even if it was outside my affinity. The problem was I couldn’t find something worth learning in Skyholme. It was another reason I planned to travel to the elven city of Llorth. The reference texts I found said they had one of the best magical libraries in 30,000 miles. Of course, I would have to learn the basic elven language or purchase a set of expensive enchanted spectacles to reach the notes.

I took the dungeon copy of the personal invisibility spell and collapsed into my chair. I set my internal alarm for six hours and began to study.

After making some progress, I left my dimensional space, set my alarms and privacy screen, and slept in my apartment. I found the best way to study my spells was in seclusion in my dimensional closet. It also helped me level the dimensional closet spell faster. It was currently level 19. At level 23, spells received not just an evolution but an upgrade as well. For the dimensional closet spell, Sebastian said the additional benefit was either going to be a 20% increase in all my dimensions or a 50% increase in a single dimension. Sebastion’s dimensional closet spell was only level 16, but he had a much smaller aether pool than myself.

The morning brought a lot of excitement. Gareth had hosted his typical post-dungeon dive party in his apartment. His constitution allowed him to recover quickly. Talia had bloodshot eyes and a disheveled look at breakfast. Sammie and Lana were huddled together. They lived in the same apartment and had become extremely close. Lana was not coming with us to the lowlands, so they were sad to be parting.

Fera and Gareth were also tightly together as the cooks brought out abundant food. I was surprised Mera was not here, but Fera said she wanted to get an early start on Frost Mead production. More likely, she was just avoiding me. I had turned down her advances numerous times in the last few weeks, and she was getting frustrated. She even did the unthinkable. She became friends with Freya. To make matters worse, Freya loved her like an older sister now. So Freya was encouraging me to reciprocate Mera’s interest.

Cilia and Leda came down as well for breakfast. They had been busy prepping the Maelstrom the last week. Leda and Cila were also kind of a loose couple. At least, I assumed that as I knew Leda was in love with Cila, and they seemed extremely happy in each other’s proximity. But maybe I was wrong—reading relationships and a person’s interests was not my strong suit.

Cila joked, “Storme, are you sure you want the maiden voyage to be all the way to the lowlands? What if one of the runes fails, and we all plummet to our deaths?” The entire table laughed. They knew how meticulously I had been inscribing the runes for the ship and running aether through them to test them.

I retorted, “Well if you are not confident, I can always find a new captain and pilot.” Cilia immediately went quiet even though my tone was joking and the threat was hollow. The Maelstrom was the fastest ship in Skyholme and the most advanced.

Gareth chimed in, “Are you sure you don’t want to explore a dungeon or two while we are down there.” This was Gareth’s hundredth time requesting this. My look had him hold up his hands in submission.

Freya came screaming into the restaurant with a massive Monty behind her. She ran into me and gave me a massive hug. Monty hopped up and licked my face. “I almost overslept!” She said, hugging me. “You better come back!” She said in a warning tone.

This was the fault of the Skyholme educational system. They made the lowlands sound extremely dangerous. Which they were, but not that dangerous. I said, “Our Dungeon Academy classes start in eight days. Gareth would kill me if we missed the first day.”

With a mouth full of food, Gareth said, “That’s true, Freya.”

My mother entered shortly after Freya to wish us well. Father was already at work. He actually loved his new job overseeing inspections of cargo and passengers. He had seven men under his command and was a fairly important person in Aegis City now—as far as guards went.

Bylura entered the restaurant with an older man behind her. This must be Lucian Torrent. I stood and greeted them and offered for them to join us. The Shiny Platinum was closed as we only served lunch and dinner, so we had the place to ourselves. Lucian refused, and Leda stood to escort him to the ship. Bylura took Leda’s seat and started grabbing every sweet item she could on the table.

I thought everyone was accounted for, but Callem and Sebastian walked through the front door next, dressed in their naval uniforms. I was more than a little surprised to see them. Sebastian waved us to sit, “Relax. We just transported the two envoys here from the capital. We are not planning to stay.”

Callem stepped forward, “You are all doing a great service for all of Skyholme. I wanted to wish you well. Storme, if you have a moment?”

I stood and went to Callem for my private pep talk. Callem was too serious, though, “Storme, Loriel thinks Abaddon and Baladon are in the Sadian Empire. Maybe even in the capital. Take these and be careful.” He handed me two communication stones. I looked confused, “Both are tier-four stones, and I have the matching pairs.”

These were precious artifacts. A tier 4 stone had a range of 10,000 miles. Callem said, “Lucian has a communication device to keep him in touch with Arundel. Bylura has one to keep her in touch with Loriel. These are for you to keep in contact with me. You can give the second one to Gareth or whoever you think needs it.” Communication stones could also be used as trackers with a simple tier-one spell.

“Ok, Callem. We are going to be careful. But these should help,” we shook hands, his callused maw enveloping my smaller hand.

An hour later, the small bridge of the Maelstrom was crowded. The bay doors were open, and the ship left the floor. Only a slight variation in the forward viewing glass told us we had moved.

“Retracting landing gear,” Leda announced. The hull had a very slight hum as it vibrated from the aetheric runes powering numerous enchantments. “Clear.”

Cila, sitting in the captain’s chair, piloted the ship slowly out of the hangar. Once clear, she cracked a smile and opened her up, spinning the ship in a corkscrew and testing the gravity plating. Some people got sick on the bridge, and I spammed my cleanliness spell, slightly annoyed. The Maelstrom continued to accelerate to the edge of the island and then dove over the edge—heading to the lowlands.