Chapter 161

My reunion with Aelyn had not gone as I had imagined.  She looked and acted different than I remembered her.  As I watched her, she was authoritative, confident, and focused.  “Glint,” she yelled at the Minotaur, who snapped to face her.  “I want everyone spread out on the deck.  When the Skyholme fleet engages, we will target one of the ships and board her, and the goal is to capture a prize.” The bullman’s face contorted in a gleeful odd smile.

“They will never stay still long enough for you to get on board,” I advised her.

Captain Hyperion smirked, his attitude undeterred by a missing arm, “I am sure I can convince them. I have been known to be persuasive.” I didn’t understand his confidence.

Aelyn started giving orders to select the best target for her crew, maneuvering her ship, and identifying the smaller targets with fewer men on deck.

Our seven pirate-mercenary skyships merged with the twenty-eight from Skyholme.  I had Cilia keep the Maelstrom at a distance on the periphery as the ship had no invisibility or aether cannons. Skyholme had seventeen Harbingers and nine Wasps.  I hoped this was not all that was left of the Skyholme fleet.  The two ships from the Principality of Marstom were with them as well.  It might have been an impressive sight, except that almost all the ships showed some damage, and several civilians were on the decks joining the fight.

I recognized most of the names on the bows of the Harbingers and Wasps as I had worked on most of their runes at one point.  Captain Hyperion began talking to the air, and I realized the Skyholme mages were communicating with him to help plan the assault.  The Skyholme Navy was prepared to take whatever help it could, even from pirates.  Hyperion started coordinating with Aelyn, and I moved away from the stern to the bow.  I would be playing my own role in this coming battle and wanted to study the enemy.

The remaining Black Maurader’s ships were over the capital, and skiffs darted back and forth to the burning city; infrequent blasts of fire or bolts of lighting from defenders flashed toward them.  The fight was ongoing, but the defenders were subdued and probably mostly in hiding.  The black skyships danced over the city, most circling in extended slow circles, conserving aether.  I noted the Onyx Pegasus hovering about a mile above Skyhold and all the ships.  The Sky King and the Mage Hunter were still on board that ship.

Aelyn’s pirate ships did not fall into formation very well as they were not used to working in groups.  At least these remaining captains did not flee at the first heavy fighting they encountered.  The one good thing in this catastrophe was that my lesser restoration spell had finally reached level twenty-three, and evolution gave me access to inefficient limb regeneration.  I had no plans to use it at the moment as I was conserving my aether for the final clash with the Black Mauraders.

We got close enough for aether cannons to begin an exchange.  The Black Mauraders were focusing their cannons on one of the old Harbingers with the large, powerful cannons.  The ship fired in retaliation and managed to score a lucky hit and burn out a large Maurader skyship’s aether shield.  The black craft tried to retreat, but the Skyholme fleet used the same tactic, with all ships targeting the defenseless skyship. Trying to follow the dizzying array of combat quickly got disorienting.

Both the old Skyholme Harbinger and the large Maurader ship began to fall from the sky, the damage to their runes too severe to sustain themselves.  Soon, a lattice of aether cannon blasts laced through the sky in a web as skyships dodged among the blasts.  The two fleets began to mix together in a chaotic mess. The Skyholme fleet switched its targeting to the fast-moving skiffs.  They were much more challenging to hit, but a single hit could overpower the aether shield and down the skiff carrying twenty or more pirates.

I was trying to choose my own target.  I didn’t want to end up on a ship that my allies would attack with aether cannons, but I also wanted to make sure my efforts would help with the battle.  The Maurader’s fleet looked to be holding position in an attempt to retrieve their men and women on the ground. There were about fifty black ships, with one or two rising from the city with the skiffs.

I tried to exchange with a Maurader on one of the faster, smaller ships in the thick of combat with the Skyholme fleet. The small ship reminded me of the Maelstrom with its speed and taking opportunistic attacks on the large Harbingers. After identifying a crew member, I found my ability blocked. Their defenses against me were still active. Maybe if I tried a ship further away?

I decided on a ship on the far side of the battle, away from the city and most of the combat. The Mauraders on the deck were extremely small but still visible over three miles away. I assumed it was some type of support ship, and it appeared to be just retrieving skiffs loaded with cargo from the city. It would take a lot of aether due to the distance, but it should cause some disruption in the Black Maurader Fleet if I could take control of it. I tested to make sure my exchange ability would work, and I could connect with one of the tiny figures.

As the Prancing Eagle dove under a Skyholme Wasp, I stepped off the bow, dooming the person I exchanged with a quick fall to their death. The exchange took a lot of aether, but I appeared on the faraway ship’s deck, and immediately danced with my blade among the surprised crew. Two young men fell to my blade as I tried to get to locate the runes to damage them. A surprised woman asked, in a heavy accent, “How did you bypass my aether shielding?” I immediately guessed she was the captain and was not made aware of my exchange ability.

Two men quickly blocked my path toward the frightened, angry female captain wearing a black tricorn hat. The entire crew moved to block access to the bridge. A silver-haired woman warned the captain, “This is the mage we warned about, Cristal. We should be cautious.” I smiled devilishly at the old woman and captain.

I was soon among the black-dressed crew, weaving a bloody path with my falchion.  An ice spear stuck me, causing my aether shield to flash and me to stumble from the mass of the ice.  I rushed through two pirates and slashed the terrified mage across the chest, cutting a deep diagonal across his chest. I was sure it would be his death as I was now focused on defending myself from a war hammer and bastard sword as the pirates retaliated.  Another mage was kneeling over an injured pirate, healing him, and he became my next target.  He never noticed my rapid approach, and I took him across the back of the neck.  Any crew that demonstrated any magic became my target.

Screams of dismay and anger echoed in the air as I neutralized threat after threat on the deck.  When my aether shield expired, I went defensive until I could renew it a few heartbeats later. The few injuries I took were quickly healing. It was not long before the deck of the ship was littered with bodies and slick with flowing blood.

The captain had retreated from my sight, willing to place her crew in my path to slow me.  The resistance was minimal as all the mages were now eliminated.  I cut down pirate after pirate, casting arcane webs to slow the crew and alarm flash-bangs to disorient them.  The captain and old woman had retreated below deck, giving me free access to her bridge and the skyship controls.

I pressed onto the bridge, killing the two women inside who were handled their rapiers like novices.  No one followed me for the moment, realizing to do so would mean a quick death.  I was planning to ram this skyship into another.  The control layout was simple, and they were labeled in the common script of the Sphere.  From the controls, I realized that this ship was more of a transport designed for looting and not fighting.  The bridge had no aether cannon controls, and the aether crystals showed almost full capacity, so they

As I was getting ready to ram another ship, a skiff landed on deck, skidding on the layer of dead bodies I had left behind.  Heavily armored Black Mauraders landed on the deck and started forming ranks.  They were mostly human and dwarf pirates wearing the same black hardened leather armor with the Black Maurader icon on their chest.  Their coordination told me they were experienced fighters.  “Don’t let him escape!”  A scarred pirate with tight, short white hair yelled.  “One thousand gold to the one who gets the killing blow!”  His men cheered, and I sent repeated lightning spears at them, only to see aether shields flare to protect them.

“How flattering that pirates have put a bounty on me!”  I teased the new additions to the fight.  I was not going to remain here much longer as I worked over the controls, damaging them and making controlling the skyship impossible.  From the bridge, I had a view of the deck as the warriors prepared to attack me and the battle beyond in the skies.  I briefly took in what was happening as the pirates waited for a second skiff to join them.  I tried to swat the second skiff with my own ship, but they had the advantage of being much more maneuverable.  The best I could do was prevent them from landing.

In the distance, I could see the Prancing Eagle had managed to grapple one of the Black Maurader ships.  I had no idea how they had achieved the feat.  However, two other Black Mauraders skyships were launching spells at the Prancing Eagle.  If those ships managed to grapple as well, Aelyn’s crew would be overrun.  I altered my course slightly toward them, hoping to close the distance to reduce my aether cost when I did exchange.

There were a few mages on the skiff, and they were preparing spells with the fighters. Seeing I was not going to allow the other skiff to land safely, they started to advance. My arcane web was ineffective, and I clenched my teeth. They were not going to give me time to ram another of the Maurader skyships. They were only thirty feet away, and I melted the controls with my metal shaping and searched for someone to exchange with on another skyship.

I selected someone in black clothing fighting on the Prancing Eagle. I was assuming in the mass of bodies, anyone in all black was a Maurader. I used the ability and had to duck under a large axe as Glint pinwheeled into a crowd of men in black, forcing them back. I rolled away, “Glint, it is me! I am at your back.” The deck had dead and men moaning in pain. It looked like Aelyn’s attempt to take the ship had failed, and the Mauraders had pushed back and were taking her ship instead. One of the pirate skiffs had crashed on the ship’s deck.

I looked for Aelyn and did not see her, “Where is Aelyn?” I asked while moving inside the guard of a Maurader and getting under his chin with my blade. Without healing, he would bleed or drown in his own blood.

Glint had a dagger in his ribs, and his thigh was split open, exposing the muscle. I touched his thigh and did a flash heal. Relief flooded his face as he turned to face another opponent, “She is on the Maurader ship, mage.” The sky vessels were adjacent, and most of the fighting was on the decks. It looked like Aelyn only had a few crew on this ship.

I heard Aelyn’s clear voice, “Everyone to the black ship!” Glint didn’t wait and leaped across the five feet of open-air separating the ships. I did the same as the gap quickly started to widen. The Pracning Eagle fell rapidly away behind me as I landed on the deck of the Black Maurader ship. My head whipped around, looking for Aelyn. She was cornered on the aft deck with six of her men, including Captain Hyperion.

Glint roared and charged, shouldering a Maurader to the deck to help his captain. I followed, stabbing the downed man in the chest as I passed. Aelyn’s crew was outnumbered two to one, but it was a more even fight now that the forty Mauraders on the Prancing Eagle were removed.

I focused my efforts on thinning the Mauraders and targeting the few mages they had on board. The ship I had come from zipped overhead, missing us by a hundred yards. Unless someone rescued them, that cargo ship stuffed with valuables from Skyholme would go for a long time before running out of aether and crashing into the lowlands.

Slowly, the tide began to turn on the deck, with me killing someone with a rapid strike and then healing Aelyn’s crew with a flash heal to keep them fighting. I did not pay attention to the Fleet engagement around us, but it looked like the Mauraders were pulling back. I reached Aelyn’s side to find Captain Hyerpion on one knee, soaking wet from sweat.

His exhausted face smiled at me, “Good of you to come and join us. I wondered where you had gotten off to.”

Aelyn noticed me as well, “Storme, we need to take the bridge. They had two mages in there and three fighters.” I looked to where she pointed, and two dead minotaurs were outside the door. Both bodies were smoking.

“I will take care of it,” I said, turning to the bridge cabin door.

It was a heavy oak door and probably barred from the inside. I was thinking about how to enter when the sun was briefly blocked out before the ship shuddered from an impact. At mid-deck, the Sky King had landed. The black dragon had crushed two of Aelyn’s pirates and breathed thick acid, eliminating everyone from midship to stern, Black Mauraders and Aelyn’s crew alike. His tail lashed more men as he turned to face us in the bow.

His dragon fear washed over everyone, paralyzing everyone but me. His coal-red eyes focused on me, “No more mage! You will not take anything else from me! Your time is at an end, and I will return to your islands and kill everyone!”

I was surprised when Captain Hyperion whispered from his prone position on the deck, “I have enough aether to hold him for maybe a dozen seconds.”

“Are you faking being affected?” I asked the elf.

“Wouldn’t you? It is a real dragon! Can you kill it if I give you a few seconds?” He repeated, and the dragon turned its gaze onto the elf.

“You think you can hold me? No one can hold the Sky King! He is inevitability!” The black dragon inhaled, ready to bathe us in a cleansing breath of acid.

“Hold him!” I yelled, rushing forward and trusting the elf. The Sky King suddenly paused in its inhale and struggled to move, its muscles rippling under its scales. My falchion slashed into its long neck. A single scale chipped, and my hands stung from the strike.

Hyperion barked with a laugh, “Well, at least you tried.”

I turned on my heel and put all my body weight into my next swing, targeting the same scale. Another larger chip went flying but also exposed his dragon flesh underneath. I adjusted my stance to a lunge, placing the tip on the small exposure. I leaned in with my body weight and all my speed, sliding the falchion into the dragon’s throat.

Acid hissed out of the wound, dripping onto my hands. I used the leverage of the blade to move the tip inside the dragon’s neck to do as much damage as possible. My aether shield failed, and the flesh on my hands melted as the acid hit it. I jerked the blade and retreated to Aelyn, Glint, and Hyperion’s side.

The rage in the Sky King’s eyes as he fought whatever magic was restraining him was evident. The handle of my falchion had a flow of acid and blood coming off of it, pooling and burning a hole in the deck. Hyperion looked ready to pass out, “Hold him longer, Hyperion,” I encouraged. I did not know the anatomy of a dragon, but I did enough damage that its lungs should be filling with blood.

Realization reached the dragon’s eyes, and he began to shrink rapidly. Hyperion just let out a gasp, “I’m done,” before passing out. The dragon was morphing back down to his human size. The flesh on my hands was still regenerating as I removed another weapon from my dimensional closet. It wasn’t needed. Although Hyperion couldn’t hold the dragon any longer, my falchion had remained intact enough to pierce through the body.

He fumbled with the handle protruding from his body. As he did so, I moved forward and used the runic long sword to pierce his eye. Strangely, even with my momentum and body weight, I couldn’t pierce the back of his skull. The Sky King collapsed to the deck and, upon death, slowly swelled back to his draconic form, this time dead.

I looked to the skies to see how the battle was unfolding; a number of the Black ships had already fled, and only about thirty Black Maurader ships remained, compared to about eighteen Skyholme ships. I spotted the Onyx Pegasus above us and thought I saw the face of the Mage Hunter looking down. Before I could come up with a plan, the Onyx Pegasus rose higher into the air and moved away from the island. The rest of the Black Maurader skyships are going with it. A few skiffs trailing behind made an attempt to catch up to the fleet, but the Skyholme ships were merciless in destroying them.

Aelyn stood, the dragon fear no longer affecting her. She took in the skies, the unconscious Captain Hyperion, the dead dragon, and me. “Storme,” she started with a slight smile, “Looks like I save you this time.”

“It looks like you did,” I said, returning her smile. “What do you want for dinner?” I was almost out of aether myself from the prolonged fight. I did the best I could to heal Aelyn’s crew. She only had five minotaurs and three elves left alive, including Hyperion. The Prancing Eagle had crashed into the city as I learned Captain Hyperion had used his ability to rip its aether stone power core out forcibly.

The ship Aelyn had captured was the Dark Tide. It was one of the larger warships the Black Mauraders had brought to Skyholme. We remained in the skies as we docked with a Harbinger, and the Skyholme crew helped Aelyn’s crew clear the deck below. Aelyn was claiming the ship as a prize, and I assumed the Skyholme Triumvirate would allow it.

The Maelstrom came and picked me up. I had to get to Titan’s Shield and make sure everyone was ok there. Maybe my father was also still alive in the wreckage of the skyship docks. I was certain a massive search and rescue operation was happening, but the docks were probably a low priority.

Using Leda’s communication stone, I talked with Sebastian. “Storme, we have everything under control. Three Wasps are following the remnants of the Maurader Fleet. You helped us win the day. It will take time to make sure the cities are clear of the pirates, but it is a victory.”

“Sebastian, I am going to look for my father in Aegis City. You can find me at the Shiny Platinum if you are looking for me,” I informed the Admiral.

I landed on the roof of the Shiny Platinum and looked out at the destruction. The streets were littered with bodies, and the skyship docks were a twisted wreck of timbers. A few braver citizens were in the streets, moving the bodies of the dead Mauraders, hoping to get a head start on cleaning and looting the invaders. I noted a man remove the purse of one raider and stuffed it into his pocket.

I walked through the wreckage of the skyship docks, looking and listening for survivors. The stone tower where my father worked had collapsed. I cleared debris using my dimensional closet to fill in the rubble. Bleiz worked alongside me, and Gareth arrived a few hours into the effort.

The third body we uncovered was my father, Caleb Hardlight. He had been crushed under the rubble, and the defensive rings I gave him probably only protected him long enough not to have his body completely mutilated.

I did not use my cleanliness spell as Gareth, and I got him onto a stretcher to carry him back to the Shiny Platinum. The building only had mild damage compared to others around it. It was also now empty, but the freezer had been raided for all its food. A small loss. We put my father inside as I knew my mother would want to see him.

“I am sorry, Storme,” Gareth said. “If you want, I will travel the Sphere with you and kill every last Black Maurader we find.”

I looked up from my father’s face to his, “The Black Mauraders have made an enemy today of the High Mage of Skyholme. In time, when I am ready, I will hunt them. For now, we must clean up. First, I am going to find the Sky King’s ship where it crashed. After that, I will bring mother to see father.” My face was stern, but tears did run down my cheeks.

I had a lot of questions to answer and a lot of revenge to dole out.