Chapter 141 Homeward Bound

The Princess had her luggage delivered to the Maelstrom, and by the sheer volume, I thought she might be moving to Skyholme permanently.  A messenger from the Prince arrived with thirty-five platinum as I had confirmed acceptance of the posting in the Adventurers Guild to escort the Princess.  My metal sense told me the coins were only eighty-eight percent pure, a common tactic by kingdoms to stretch their coin.  They were minted with the image of the Prince on one side and a dragon in flight on the other side.  The dragon was the symbol of the kingdom that the Principality belonged to.

In the hours that we waited on the pleasure of the Princess, I purchased one thousand pounds of steel ingots.  They were cheap in the city as the local dungeon sourced both iron and coal.  With the extended return trip, I planned to work on the aether cannons for the Maelstrom.  I did not have enough adamantine to complete the cannons as I was designing them, but I would do as much work on them as I could now that I had a plan for what I wanted.

A familiar skyship landed next to the Maelstrom, and Captain Volantis asked for permission to board.  I granted it, and we ended up on the bridge.  He was impressed, “Storme, your ship is extremely impressive.  I like the spelled glass in the front of the bridge with the view.  Is it just viewable one way?”

“It is artificed that way and also hardened as well,” I replied as he walked the small bridge.

He admired the two map walls and studied the marks that Leda had put on them.  He finally turned to me.  “I wanted to discuss our speed, cruising height, and time to destination.  We have added additional air mages and should be able to cycle them to maintain speed.  I estimate our flight time will be about one hundred and seven hours to reach Skyholme.  The Prince’s trade ship can also keep up with us.”

“Faster than I estimated.  Four and a half days.”  I ran the numbers in my head, “The Maelstrom can make the trip continuously as well, without landing to recharge.  The Sky Wraith will need to land to recharge her aether crystals twice at the slower pace,” I told him.  Both my skyships were going to travel considerably slower than our best speed to stay with the slower Principality ships.  The Maelstrom, at full speed, could reach Skyholme in just over half a day.  The Sky Wraith could do it in two days.

“I am sorry we are slowing you down,” the Captain focused on me.  “We can add an air mage to the Sky Wraith.  She does have a single mast, which should help her operation time.”

“That would be agreeable.  Then we might only need to land once.  Flight altitude of two miles?”  I asked.

“Agreeable.  We are taking on twenty additional soldiers as well.  I am told we expect to be fighting the Black Mauraders?”  The Captain’s tone turned serious, but he maintained a constant friendly half-smile.

“You can talk to my navigator, Leda.  She has the documents that shows the Black Mauraders are massing for an assault on Skyholme. Both the Night Jewel and Sky Wraith were going to be part of the pirate’s attack plan.  However, I do not know how many ships they are sending against the Islands.”  The Captain nodded at my comment.

“Storme the Black Mauraders are an organization that spans the Sphere.  Their seat of power is the Midnight Moon,” he informed me.

“The Midnight Moon?  The Dark Moon?  Is it in season?”  I asked.  There were twenty-three moons in the Sphere.  Moon was a misnomer as they were as large as planets and inhabited as such.  The real powers of the Sphere resided on the moons, controlling the entire planet.  You knew when a year passed by the orbits of the moons.  I did not follow them, though, relying on the calendar instead.

“Fortunately, no.  It is on the other side of the Sphere at this time.  If it was in the sky, the Prince would not have sent us fearing elite forces from the Black Mauraduers coming from the moon,” he revealed.  I thought about the possibility of the Maelstrom reaching one of the moons.  With the new dual crystals, it was now possible.  Five or six days travel, by my estimation, if the moon was visible.

I asked, “How involved will you be when the Black Mauraders attack?”  I asked with some skepticism in my voice.

Captain Voltanis lost his smile, “Our primary goal is to protect the Princess.  We are not to engage in the heart of a battle; just pick off the strays.  But we will help.”

I nodded. It was about what I would expect.  Skyships were worth hundreds of thousands of gold.  Risking their ships for a foreign power would not be wise.   “Any help is welcome,” I left him after introducing him to Leda.

I supervised the arrival of my steel bars, and the Princess arrived as they were being loaded.  She had an old, stern-looking woman with her. I assumed this was the attendant she had chosen. I noticed the old woman’s steps were purposeful. She was a trained fighter and carried herself as such. Her loose dress probably hid wiry muscles.

Two older soldiers in the Principality uniforms trailed a few feet behind her.  She walked up the ramp, “I trust my things have arrived?”  The crates and luggage were behind me and visible.  She nodded when I pointed.  Amelia asked, “I would be interested in taking meals with you during the voyage to pick your brain about your homeland.”  She was beaming and looked at my cargo, “Steel?  There is not a large margin for the distance traveled.  If you want, I can educate you in the intricacies of trade within the Sphere,” she was smiling, and her old attendant didn’t hide her disappointment.

She was definitely coming on the trip with ulterior motives.  “Thank you for your concern about my financial ventures, but I will be fine.  I will bring you to your cabin so you can settle in and unpack.  I talked with Captain Volantis a few hours ago about the planned course of travel.  We are ready to depart.”  I brought her inside and up to the upper deck and showed her the small room Bleiz had vacated.  I thought she would protest the small quarters and request the captain’s quarters.

“This will do,”  she said, testing one of the two beds.  “The Sun Sprite, my father’s merchant ship, is being loaded with trade goods.  It will be ready in a few hours.  It is one of his few pure skyships, no sails,”  She said, inspecting her quarters.  “Where will we be eating together?  Your cabin?”

“I do not know about meals together, maybe with all the crew in the cargo hold?”  I offered, a little reluctant to be left alone with the woman.  “Besides, my cabin is packed with projects, and I have two pet cats.” I came up with an excuse.

“Cats!  I love animals!  Can I meet them?”  She got excited.  It might have been fabricated excitement, but I did not see why not.

My cabin was just twenty feet, as the upper deck was not large.  I opened the door, and Adrial and Kiara were immediately active, rushing me for the expected food and training.  Amelia gaped, “Those are displacer beasts!”  She looked more surprised than afraid.

“They are well trained and young.  If you do not want to meet them, that is fine.”  It was a staring contest between the Princess and the cats as they studied each other, trying to determine the other’s intentions.  The Princess moved into the cabin confidently and petted the white cat.  Soon, she was petting both and smiling as they playfully tugged on her arms with their tentacles.

“I never knew they could be white. I have only seen the black ones in books.  They are adorable!  How big will they get?”  She asked, focused on the cats.

“Somewhere between five and six hundred pounds.  They are just over fifty pounds now,” I informed her.

She scanned the cabin.  It was three times the size of hers.  “We can have our meals together at your desk there.  I am sure you will not mind cleaning it off to eat.”   I was getting the impression this Princess was the same as Loriel, just in prettier packaging.  Maybe it was too early to make that determination.

“Perhaps just dinner. I have a number of things to work on during the voyage,” I said, trying to limit our one-on-one time.

“I am working on imprinting a new spell, I am trying to figure out and devise a runic configuration for aether cannons for the Maelstrom, I have to train my cats, I have combat practice with Bleiz, I have my aether core exercises, and I have to split shifts on the bridge with Leda.” I listed off anything that came to mind.

Princess Amelia absorbed everything and focused on one thing, “You are an artificer as well?”

“I just dabble,” I moaned internally.

“My eldest sister married an artificer. I find the craft fascinating. I would be interested in discussing it with you at our dinners,” she smiled and excused herself.

I closed the door and found Bleiz in the room when I did. He had a wolfish grin on. “I asked around a bit in the city about the Princess.” I held up my hand and set the privacy wards before he continued. Bleiz, “Nothing nefarious. She handles much of the Prince’s trade outside the Principality, mostly with the other Principalities. The Prince has given his daughters free reign to marry who they wish. The first daughter married a delver and the second an artificer. Seems this one has her sights set on both.”

“I have only been in the city a day. How can she be interested in me? We have barely met,” I dismissed his assertion even though Amelia’s actions indicated otherwise.

“You are the most famous person in Malaise, Storme. The return of the Night Jewel and the killing of the pirate Wraith. She was even watching you from during the dinner with the Prince,” Bleiz said smugly.

“No, she wasn’t. I would have remembered,” I retorted.

Bleiz tapped his nose, “She was disguised at the table but not her smell. Just now, I recognized it.”

“It is my problem to deal with, but thank you for checking on her, Bleiz.” He left my cabin smirking.

The escort fleet was on its way.  The Maelstrom was in the center and flanked by the Sun Sprite and Sky Wraith.  The two Principality warships were on the wings.  It took an hour to match speed with the Sky Wraith, feeling out her speed with the air mage.  I locked in our speed and retreated to my cabin.  The Princess remained on the bridge, conversing with Leda at the forward viewing glass.  Bleiz walked with me to my cabin.

“I will keep an eye on the two guards below. I have made a bed near the stairs,” Bleiz informed me. “I do not think they are much of a threat to you, but the maid gives me pause.”

“Me as well. She is a seasoned warrior and not out of practice either,” I returned.

On the first day of the voyage, I shaped the two aether cannons in my core room. The problem with powerful aether cannons on skyships was that they needed to be far enough away from your primary runes to not interfere with them due to aether bleed. They also drew a lot of aether at once, so the runes either needed to be very large or insulated extremely well. Adamantine was too expensive and rare, so gold was used as the primary insulator. The problem with gold was that it would need to be replenished after just a few firings.

It was just another thing that made operating skyships very expensive. I would have done the work in my cabin, but the eight-foot-long cannons took up too much room, especially if I was having meals with the Princess. The steel cannon was just a scaffolding for the runic work for the cannons.

The two different cannons I was working on were copying the disruptor cannon from the Sky Wraith and the heavy assault cannon from the old Skyholme Harbingers, albeit scaling down the second one. I would have to install them in the forward cargo hold and then create new runes, tying them to the aether core crystals. The entire aether feed would have to be mithril and coated in adamantine. Then, all the runes on the cannon would also need to be the same.

At least with my metal shaping ability, I could use a very thin coating of the difficult-to-work adamantine. Still, it was going to take a lot of adamantine. My other choice would be to cage separate aether crystals in adamantine inside the cannons. Aether crystals powerful enough to power the cannons would be an additional cost, and then they would have to be removed in order to recharge.

For now, I was making a much lesser version of the disruptor cannon in mithril runes and coating it in gold as an insulator. It would be able to fire five, maybe six times. This was to try and figure out the best way to aim the cannon from the bridge since I would not have a trained crew to aim and fire it.

I had been planning to cook for Amelia, but her attendant prepared the meal from the supplies she brought on board. She talked the entire time, asking me about my enchanting work first before moving on to questions about Skyholme. From her questions about enchanting, it was obvious she knew very little about the practice. She was a polite conversationalist. Maybe she was not as scheming as Loriel.

“Do not feed Adrial and Kiara from the table, please,” I interrupted my answer on the common products of the dungeons of Skyholme.

She smiled and dropped the piece of steak on the floor anyway, “I will not do it again.” I had given the cats the gesture to sit and used my cleanliness spell to destroy the dropped meat.

“Training them is an extremely rigid affair. Your actions confuse their training,” I told her. She did not do it again but asked to feed the cats their regular meal, and I allowed her to do that.

In the morning of the next day, she came to watch me and Bleiz train together. I was using aether shields and ice ball as my only two spells. It kept the combat mostly even but slightly in Bleiz’s favor. Amelia was not the only spectator as Sammie, and the two guards watched as well. We both cleaned ourselves with cleanliness spells when we finished.

Amelia asked, “How did you defeat the Wraith?”

I studied her, and she obviously knew what I had demonstrated was not enough skill to overcome a ship full of pirates. I took my two-handed falchion from my dimensional space, “This weapon is enchanted. It won me his head.” She took the blade and admired it. I was not going to reveal all my abilities to her.

“Impressive artificed weapon. Did you make it yourself?” She asked expectantly.

I took the blade back and returned it to my space. “I designed it and supplied the materials,” I replied, not answering further. I left the cargo hold to take over the bridge. We were scheduled to land in the city of Messimbra. It was a trade city the Princess was familiar with but outside the Principality.

Leda was always on the bridge and greeted me as I entered, “I talked with Cilia. Her aether crystals are about half full, and she expects to need just over half a day to recharge when we land. The air mage, Gemma, is doing a remarkable job.”

“She was the mage they sent? Yes, she is good,” I replied.

“Is there anything useful in Messimbra?” I asked Leda.

“Amelia says there is a portal gate to one of the moons, but it only works when the moon is close. They export a lot of dungeon goods to the moon,” Leda answered while packing her things. I would take an eight-hour shift while she slept in the small cabin she and Cilia shared.

“Which moon?” I asked, settling into the pilot’s chair with my sketchbook for the cannon runes.

“It is the Ocean Moon, Vand.” She replied. I nodded. As long as it was not the Dark Moon, I did not care. The cats joined me on the bridge as they were now allowed free range. I fed them their first meal, and we worked on their training. I was expecting the Princess to join us, as she seemed to find me everywhere on the small ship, but she did not.

The city of Messimbra asked that we not land in their city. Three warships were not welcome within their walls. There was a lake in a mountain ten miles north that we were directed to. The Maelstrom set down on the shore of a tiny village while the other four ships settled in the water.

All the captains came together to discuss if we could make it in one more leg to Skyholme. We had traveled about nine-thousand miles and had another fourteen-thousand miles remaining. Captain Volantis agreed to transfer a second air mage to the Sky Wraith. The stay was uneventful, and we were back on our way half a day later.

The next two days found the Princess trying to insert herself into my daily routine. Watching me practice with Bleiz. Sitting with me on my shift on the bridge. Helping me train the cats. And asking me questions about Skyholme at dinner and my skills as an enchanter. I admit she was slowly breaking me down.

However, I was glad to see the tiny dot in the distance that denoted one of the Skyholme Islands. I had been away for far too long.