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Skybreaker

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The Devil's Fist

The storm boiled above the Indian Ocean, a dark, bristling wall of cloud, blocking our passage west. We were still fifty kilometres off, but its high winds had been giving us a shake for the past half hour. Through the tall windows of the control car, I watched the horizon slew as the ship struggled to keep steady. The storm was warning us off, but the captain gave no order to change course.

We were half a day out of Jakarta and our holds were supposed to be filled with rubber. But there'd been some mix-up, or crooked dealing, and we were flying empty. Captain Tritus was in a foul mood, his mouth clenching a cigarette on one side, and on the other, muttering darkly about how was he expected to pay and feed his crew with an empty belly. He'd managed to line up a cargo in Alexandria, and he needed to get us there fast.

'We'll clip her,' he told his first officer, Mr Curtis. 'She's not got much power on her southern fringe. We'll sail right through.'

Mr Curtis nodded, but said nothing. He looked a little queasy, but then again, he always looked a little queasy. Anyone would, serving aboard the *Flotsam* under Tritus. The captain was a short, stocky man, with a greasy fringe of pale hair that jutted out beyond his hat. He was not much to look at, but he had Rumpelstiltskin's own temper and when angry – which was often – his fist clenched and pounded the air, his barrel chest thrust forward, and his orders shot out like a hound's bark. His crew tended to say as little as possible. They did as they were told and smoked sullenly, filling the control car with a permanent yellow pall. It looked like a waiting room in purgatory.

The control car was a cramped affair, without a separate navigation or wireless room. The navigator and I worked at a small table towards the back. I usually liked having a clear line of sight out the front windows, but right now, the view was not an encouraging one.

Flying into a storm, even its outer edges, did not sound like a good idea to me. And this was no ordinary tempest. Everyone on the bridge knew what it was: the Devil's Fist, a near eternal typhoon that migrated about the North Indian basin year-round. She was infamous, and earned her name by striking airships out of the sky.

'Eyes on the compass, Mr Cruse,' the navigator, Mr Domville, reminded me quietly.

'Sorry, sir.' I checked the needle and reported our new heading. Mr Domville made his swift markings on the chart. Our course was starting to look like the path of a

drunken sailor, zigzagging as we fought the headwinds. They were shoving at us something terrible.

Through the glass observation panels in the floor, I looked down at the sea, three hundred metres below us. Spume blew sideways off the high crests. Suddenly we were coming about again, and I watched the compass needle whirl to its new heading. Columbus himself would have had trouble charting a course in such weather.

'Two hundred and seventy-one degrees,' I read out.

'Do you wish you were back in Paris, Mr Cruse?' the navigator asked.

'I'm always happiest flying,' I told him truthfully, for I was born in the air, and it was more home to me than earth.

'Well then, I wish *I* were back in Paris,' Mr Domville said, and gave me one of his rare grins.

Of all the crew, he was my favourite. Granted, there was little competition from the hot-tempered captain and his stodgy, surly officers, but Mr Domville was cut from different cloth. He was a soft-spoken, bookish man, quite frail-looking really. His spectacles would not stay up on his nose, so he was in the habit of tilting his head higher to see. He had a dry cough, which I put down to all the smoke in the control car. I liked watching his hands fly across the charts, nimbly manipulating rulers and dividers. His skill gave me a new respect for the navigator's job – which, until now, I'd never taken much interest in. It was not flying. I wanted to pilot the ship,

not scribble her movements on a scrap of paper. But working with Mr Domville I'd finally realized there could be no destination without a navigator to set and chart a course.

I did feel sorry for him, serving aboard the *Flotsam*. It was a wreck of a cargo ship, running freight over Europa and the Orient. I wondered why Mr Domville didn't seek out a better position. Luckily, I only had to endure it for five more days.

All the first-year students at the Airship Academy had been shipped out on two-week training tours to study navigation. Some shipped on luxury liners, some on mail packets, some on barges and tugs. I'd had the misfortune of being placed on the *Flotsam*. The ship looked like it hadn't been refitted since the Flood, and it smelled like Noah's old boot. The crew quarters were little more than hammocks slung alongside the keel catwalk, where your sleep was soured by the stench of oil and aruba fuel. The hull looked like it had been patched with everything including cast-off trousers. The engines rattled. The food quite simply defied comprehension. Slopped on to the plate by the cook's rusty ladle, it looked like something that had already been chewed and rejected.

'Think of this as character-building experience,' Mr Domville had told me at the first meal.

Why the illustrious Academy used the *Flotsam* as a training vessel I couldn't guess, unless they were wanting to teach their students how to mutiny. Captain Tritus,

I'm sure, was glad of the fee the Academy paid to place me on board. For a heap like the *Flotsam*, it might have made the difference between having enough fuel or not. It made me long for the *Aurora*, the airship liner where I used to work before starting my studies at the Academy. Now *there* was a ship, and Captain Walken knew how to run it, and take care of his crew.

When I looked out the window again, I wished I hadn't. We'd been making for the storm's southern flank, but it now seemed to be moving with us, spinning out its dark tendrils. I looked at Captain Tritus, waiting for him to change our heading. He said nothing.

'Have you ever flown through the Fist?' I asked Mr Domville in a whisper.

He held up a single finger. 'We were very lucky.' He coughed, and seemed to have trouble stopping, so I uncorked the canteen hanging from the chart table and poured him a cup of water. He didn't look at all well.

'Thank you.'

The control car was suddenly dark as cloud engulfed us. Mr Curtis quickly switched on the interior lights, which did little more than illuminate the instruments and gauges, making skulls of the crew's faces.

'All engines at full,' Captain Tritus said. 'We'll punch through shortly. Hold her steady, Mr Beatty,' he told the helmsman.

This was a tall order, as the wind was battering us from all sides. The control car darkened further. Rain

lashed against the windows. Someone switched on the wipers, which only smeared water across the glass. The lamp over the chart table swung crazily.

'Speed?' barked the captain.

'Forty-three aeroknots, sir,' replied Curtis.

'We should do better than that with engines at full.'

'Not against these headwinds, sir.'

All around us were the unfriendliest clouds I'd ever seen, mottled grey and black, fuming. They looked so dense it seemed a miracle we were not already shattered against their bulk.

Without warning the *Flotsam* dropped and my feet nearly left the floor. I grabbed the table's edge. The crew staggered off balance. Mr Schultz was thrown off the elevator wheel, and for a moment it spun unattended before he and Mr Curtis launched themselves atop it, and fought to level off the ship. We were caught in the storm's massive downdraft.

'Two hundred metres, sir,' said Mr Curtis.

Two hundred metres! That meant we'd already fallen one hundred!

'Elevators full up,' ordered the captain.

'They're full up already, sir,' Mr Schultz replied.

'One hundred and eighty metres,' reported Mr Curtis.

I could not see the altimeter, but I could hear it. It fired a sonic pulse at the ground and used the speed of the returning echo to calculate our height. With every pulse, the altimeter gave a loud BEEP, and then a fainter

beep as the echo returned. At normal cruising height of three hundred metres, there was about two seconds between the beeps, and you noticed it no more than your own heartbeat. Mr Curtis must have adjusted the sound, for now the beeps seemed to blare through the entire car. *BEEP . . . beep . . . BEEP . . . beep . . .*

I looked down through the floor panels. All I saw was cloud, but my stomach told me we were still falling, though not as fast.

'Steady at one hundred and forty metres, sir,' reported a relieved Mr Curtis.

I drew in some breath, and then the ship plunged again. Weightlessness soared through me once more. I was not afraid of falling, but I was afraid of hitting water.

'One hundred and fifteen metres!'

BEEP, beep, BEEP, beep . . .

'Jettison all ballast tanks to two-thirds!' roared the captain.

I heard the metallic *thunk* of the hatches opening, and the brief rush of water as it sped seaward.

'One hundred!'

'Wind measuring force twelve from the south west!'

It was like riding surf: you'd feel the ship struggling to stay level, and then lurch back down with a tremendous bang that shook her entire frame. The machinists in the engine cars must have been holding on for dear life, praying the support struts did not shear off.

We were lighter now, but it did not seem to be slowing our fall. I looked at Mr Domville. His eyes were fixed on

the chart, even now updating it. His hand did not tremble.

'Eighty!'

BEEPbeep, BEEPbeep . . .

'Jettison tanks to one-half!' shouted the captain.

'Sixty-five!'

'Lift, you wreck,' cursed Captain Tritus.

The engines' roar, amplified by the dense cloud, reverberated through every beam and rivet. I hated to think of the strain on the elevator flaps.

'Fifty, sir!'

Be-be-be-be-be . . .

'Jettison all tanks!' bellowed Tritus. 'Every last drop!'

Only when disaster was imminent would a captain order such a thing. I looked down through the floor windows, saw nothing but grey, and then suddenly we dropped through it and I gave a shout. The sea was not fifteen metres below us, looking like shattered glass, great cracks of wind-lashed spray cutting diagonally across the jagged surface. I wanted to shut my eyes but couldn't.

Beeeeeeeeeee . . .

The altimeter was one long continuous sound. The crew grabbed hold of whatever was nearest. The sea would have us. I did not think of my mother, or father, or sisters, or Kate. My mind was empty. Then, all at once, I felt heavier.

We were rising!

'Twenty-five metres!' shouted Mr Curtis.

'Seal the ballast tanks!' barked the captain. 'Save what you can! We'll need it.'

'We're out of the downdraft, sir,' said Mr Curtis, looking queasier than ever.

'This is not over yet,' Captain Tritus muttered darkly.

He was right. Only seconds after he spoke, I was suddenly heavy as an elephant, my ears shrieking with the sudden change in altitude. Beside me, Mr Domville's knees buckled, and I had to grab him to keep him from collapsing. After breaking through the downdraft, the storm's updraft had us now. With no cargo, and barely any ballast, we were already dangerously light, and with the tempest's explosive energy beneath us, we careened sickeningly heavenwards. The beeps of the altimeter became less and less frequent, and then grew so faint I could scarcely hear them.

'Should we vent some lifting gas, sir?' Mr Curtis asked.

Captain Tritus said nothing.

'Sir?' the first officer repeated.

'Let her rise!' Tritus snapped. 'We're better off high until we clear the Fist.'

'Eighteen hundred . . . nineteen hundred,' said Mr Schultz at the elevator wheel, reading off the altimeter, 'two thousand and climbing . . .'

Still the wind thumped and pummelled us. Blinking away my light-headedness I got back to work with the business of the charts, directions and drift readings and wind speeds. I marvelled at the steadiness of

Mr Domville's liver-spotted hand. Even as the ship was tossed about, his notations were crisp and clear.

'You've got a magical hand, Mr Domville.'

'It's the only competent part of me,' he said, and started coughing again. I passed him more water, then zipped up my jacket. At these heights it was much colder. Mr Domville took his breaths in raspy shallow sucks. The higher we climbed, the harder it was for our bodies to get enough oxygen.

'Two thousand, three hundred metres,' announced Mr Schultz.

I watched Captain Tritus nervously. We were going too far. Like all airships, the *Flotsam* relied on hydrium, the most powerful of lifting gases, to give her flight. The hydrium was contained safely in enormous balloon-like cells within the ship's hull, but at two thousand, six hundred metres, as the outside air pressure dropped, the hydrium would swell dangerously. It might easily rupture the impermeable fabric of the cells.

'Begin venting in all cells to ninety-five per cent capacity.'

All shoulders relaxed as the captain gave the order. The *Flotsam* exhaled into the sky. Our ascent slowed, but still we rose.

At three thousand metres the *Flotsam* gave a great shudder and ploughed through the clouds, leaving the storm behind us. Suddenly it was so bright, I had to squint. The sun blazed in the western sky. I turned to look out the rear windows of the control car, and saw the

dark, roiling canyon wall of the Devil's Fist behind us.

'Good,' was all Captain Tritus said. He wasted no time lighting up another cigarette, and even offered his carton to Mr Curtis, Mr Beatty and Mr Schultz – something I'd never seen him do before. He was clearly in a celebratory mood.

'Never let it be said you can't pass through the Devil's Fist, eh? Vent the gas cells to ninety-three per cent, and level us off.'

It was lucky we were so light, or he would have had a hard time staying aloft with our gas cells so depleted. As it was, with nearly all our ballast gone, we'd have to valve even more when we came in for landing in Egypt. This would be an expensive voyage for the *Flotsam*, for hydrium was costly.

At the moment though, not even Captain Tritus seemed upset by his misadventure. We were lucky to be alive. For the first time in my life, I caught myself wishing for land. Tritus was reckless, and I did not trust him. The storm could easily have torn us apart like a kite. Just five more days and I would be back at the Academy.

'Are you all right?' I asked Mr Domville. His fingers were very pale, and his nails had a blue sheen to them.

'I don't do well with high altitudes,' he said.

I'd had little experience flying at these heights, but had read about its possible effects on crew. Altitude sickness affected everyone differently. It was called hypoxia and it could give you a headache, or it could kill you, depending on how healthy you were, and how

high. Right now all I felt was a faint pressure against my temples.

'We're bound to descend before long,' I said. 'Now that we're clear of the storm.'

Mr Domville made no reply, conserving what little breath he had.

'Crow's-nest reporting!' The muffled voice emanated from a metal grille, the end point of the long speaking tube which connected the bridge to the forward observation post high atop the ship.

Captain Tritus pulled the brass mouthpiece sharply towards his face. 'What is it?' he said, mouth clenched around his cigarette.

'Vessel to the south south east, sir! She's very high. Maybe seven thousand metres.'

All the crew looked at one another. It was virtually unheard of for a ship to fly so high. It must be a mistake. Maybe he was seeing a cloud, or even a nearby bird, and mistaking it for something far away.

'Say again, Mr Sloan!' Captain Tritus barked impatiently into the mouthpiece.

'It's definitely some kind of vessel.'

The captain removed his hat, grabbed his spyglass and stuck his head out a side window. Wind blasted at his hair, though I noticed it scarcely moved, being so well greased to his skull. He pulled his head back in with a curse.

'Can't see a damn thing.' He took up the mouthpiece. 'Not been drinking I hope, Mr Sloan!' he bellowed, and

it was not a joke. 'Don't lose sight of it now, we're coming about!' He turned to Mr Schultz. 'Angle us up eight degrees or so. Let's see if we can spot Mr Sloan's ghost ship.'

The *Flotsam* turned, and Mr Domville and I were busy for the next few minutes, updating the chart, which now resembled the scribblings of a lunatic. I felt our nose pitching up as the elevator flaps pushed our tail lower. It was an ungainly angle, and one that strained both engines and fins, but it would give the captain a better vantage point.

'We're aimed right at her now, Captain!' I heard Sloan say over the speaking tube. I wanted to rush forward and peer through the windows, but I could not leave my station. Captain Tritus scanned the skies with his spyglass.

'Zeus's throne,' he muttered, and I must say, a cold tingle swept my arms and neck. 'Something's up there. Cruse, try to raise her on the wireless!'

Since there was no proper wireless officer aboard the *Flotsam*, the task fell to the assistant navigator – me. I hurried to the ancient radio beside the chart table, hoping I'd remember what to do with the bewildering array of knobs and switches. I pulled the headphones over my ears and lifted the microphone. The radio was already tuned to the universal airship frequency.

'This is *Flotsam*, hailing vessel heading south south west from bearing ninety degrees, twenty-eight minutes longitude by nine degrees thirty-two minutes latitude. Please reply.'

When I heard nothing, I bumped up the wattage, and tried twice more, without success.

'Nothing, sir,' I told Captain Tritus.

'Try the distress frequency.'

Rapidly I turned the needle to the proper location and listened. Soft static whispered over my headphones.

'There's nothing coming in, sir.'

'Not surprised,' muttered Mr Domville. 'At that height, unless they had tanked oxygen, they'd all be unconscious.'

He was right. All the flight manuals said that at altitudes over five thousand metres, supplemental oxygen was mandatory. And the cold would be something else altogether, far below freezing. What had happened to drive her so high? I wondered if her engines had failed, or maybe she'd jettisoned too much ballast, and the storm's updraft had lifted her to this deadly height – a fate that could easily have been ours.

'Her propellers aren't even turning,' Captain Tritus remarked, spyglass to his eye. 'What a wreck! She's older than the pyramids. Can't make out her name . . .' He pulled the mouthpiece close. 'Mr Sloan, have you got her name yet?'

'It's . . .' There was a lengthy pause. 'Captain, I'm not entirely sure but I think it's the *Hyperion*.'

Without a word Captain Tritus dropped the mouthpiece and once more lifted the spyglass to his eye. For a long time he stared.

There could be no one in the control car who hadn't heard of the *Hyperion*. She was a ship of legend, like the

Marie Celeste, or the *Colossus* – vessels that had set out from harbour, and never reached their destinations. The *Hyperion* was rumoured to be carrying great wealth. She may have crashed, or been pillaged by pirates. But no wreckage was ever found. Over the years sky sailors sometimes claimed to have spotted her, always fleetingly and from afar, and usually on foggy nights. Before I was born there was a famous photograph that was supposed to be of the *Hyperion* sighted over the Irish Sea. My father had shown it to me in a book. It was later exposed as a fake. She was a ghost ship – a good story, but nothing more.

'It's her,' the captain said. 'By God, I think it's her. Look!' He thrust the spyglass at his first officer. 'Curtis, can you see her name?'

'I can't quite make it out, captain.'

'You're half blind, man! It's clear as day. Cruse, get over here! They said you had sharp young eyes. Take a look!'

Eagerly I hurried to the front of the control car and took the spyglass. When I worked aboard the *Aurora* I'd spent many hours in her crow's-nest, doing lookout duty. I had plenty of experience with a spyglass. Before I raised it to my face, I sighted the ship with my naked eye. I reckoned she was over five kilometres away, no larger than a cigarette, pale against the distant darkness of the storm front. Quickly, before her position changed, I lifted the lens to my eye. Even with my feet planted wide for balance, and both hands on the spyglass, it was

no easy feat to get a fix on her. Whenever I came close, the *Flotsam* pitched and tossed, and my view would skid off into cloud and sky.

Glimpses were all I caught:

An enormous engine pod, its paint stripped away by the elements, glistening with frost.

A control car almost entirely encased in ice, light flashing from a cracked window.

Wind-blighted letters barely visible on her flayed skin: *Hyperion*.

'It's her,' I breathed.

It sent a chill through me just to see her. How could she still be up there, so high? What spectral crew had been guiding her across the skies for forty years?

'We'll have her!' said the captain. 'Mr Domville, mark her location on the chart! Prepare to drop some ballast, Mr Curtis.'

'Sir, we're already at our maximum height,' the first officer reminded him.

'It's the *Hyperion*, Mr Curtis. By all accounts she's a floating treasure trove. I mean to claim our right of salvage. We'll tow her in!'

His speech failed to rouse an enthusiastic cheer, but no one dared contradict him.

'We've already jettisoned nearly all our ballast,' Mr Curtis pressed on uneasily. 'To reach her, we'd have to lose it all.'

'So be it. The *Hyperion* will be our ballast when we bring her down.'