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THE WIND OF WAR



The world's wind blasts the old steeple tower as if it will tear it apart stone by stone – and hurl Pandora to her death.

Rain lashes the girl's fierce, wind-burned face. Her green eyes steal sparks from the lightning storm. Pandora scrapes away dripping tangles of hair, scrubs her eyes with a sodden lace sleeve and squints into the howling darkness.

Where is Fox?

He must be up here, somewhere.

Pandora was rummaging through her hoard of old weapons in the museum when the crash of his axe echoed through the dank, storm-raked halls. *Who!* demanded a startled owl as it swooped from a headless statue to fly through one of the tall, shattered windows out into the storm.

'Fox?' Pandora called, as startled as the owl by the violent axe.

Who else could it be? There was no other human presence, only their two selves, in all the netherworld.

Yet she grabbed a shield and a sword along with her moonmoth lantern and raced through the clutter of the museum into the adjoining tower, following the noise of the axe. Up a thousand twisting stairs she ran, through scared

flutterings and slitherings and scuttlings of netherworld creatures, pausing only to skewer a fat rat with her sword – she'd roast it later for supper. Gasping for breath, she stopped as she reached an open door at the top of the stairs.

The crashing axe had stopped.

Pandora crept through the doorway. Her moonmoth lantern cast a fluttery glow upon tumbledown bookstacks, hillocks of mildewed pages and storm-shuttered windows that rattled in the hammer of the wind. As she stepped through the litter of lost centuries she spied a strange, dark gap. Tiptoeing towards it, sword at the ready, she saw that part of a bookcase was tugged out from the wall.

'Fox?' she whispered, and poked her sword, tentatively, into the gap.

The thin blade shivered in a gust of wind. Pandora squeezed into the gap and lifted her lantern.

The mothlight revealed a smashed door.

A secret door! Pandora had thought she knew every secret of this old tower.

She looked at the rusty key stuck fast in the lock, at Fox's axe still wedged in the wood. *He knew there was a secret door here? And never told me?* Furious now, she scrambled through the gash in the door, ripping her gown on jagged splinters.

Pandora climbed up into storm-blasted darkness. The wind roared through a stark geometry of archways that rose all around and above her, in a vast cone of stone and air. Amazed, she saw that she stood *inside* the great spire that topped the old tower like a spiky hat.

Now Pandora clings to an archway and battles the wind that wants to send her crashing down to the drowned city in the netherworld waters, down on to the seaweedy roofs that

rise at low tide like the helms of sunken ships. Even she, with webbed hands and feet and the soft gills on her neck, might not survive such a fall.

Raindrops as big as frogs splat upon her head. Pandora curses her dress, one of the museum's ancient hoard, its drenched skirts a dragging weight as she tries to move across the slimy stone.

'Fox!'

The wind snatches his name from her lips and the sword from her hand. The sword *clangs* as it tumbles from the tower – yet another treasure lost to the flooded world.

Something has been happening the last few days. Something big. Pandora has seen it in Fox's eyes, breathed danger in the scent of his sweat. And now he's smashed his way up into the spire in the teeth of the storm.

Pandora raises her face to the battering rain and peers up through the soaring archways of the spire to the city of New Mungo, looming high above. Its skyscrapers dwarf the old netherworld tower like a crowd of giants. *Police patrols?* She scans the enormous towers and their network of connecting sky tunnels. *Is that why Fox is up here? Surely they wouldn't swoop on a night like this!*

Skybikers can swarm down without warning like wasps from a poked nest. Pandora and Fox have a hundred hiding places from the searchlights and guns that sweep the netherworld, hunting fugitives from the boat camp beyond the city wall – though none have made it through in years.

Sky patrols have been rare this winter. The ferocious storms have kept them at bay. And the sky empire is sunk too deep in new dreams and nightmares, says Fox, to feel the tremors of revolution gathering in the world beyond its walls.

A sensation of hot goosebumps prickles Pandora's skin as

a spindly finger of lightning reaches down towards the spire. All around her, the devilish stone faces of the gargoyles in the nooks of the old tower seem electrified into demonic life. The lightning jabs at a figure perched on the strange little stairway that twists up inside the spire, past the bell that never rings, right to the innermost tip of the huge cone.

'*Fox!*'

Pandora shouts with all her might to the one who has been everything since he found her as a tiny mud urchin, abandoned in the ruins. No longer that sad and scraggy waif, Pandora has stared at her reflection in the slime pools of the museum and seen a young woman grown tall and lithe and beautiful. Now she is the warrior queen of the netherworld, dressed in the jewelled gowns and armour of lost ages, with a lustrous tangle of hair and green eyes that glow like moonmoths when she looks at Fox.

Soon she and Fox will have so much more than this kingdom of drowned ruins. When war smashes through the city wall, they will leap into the future together and rebuild a world where the sky empire's brutal grip on the flooded Earth is broken at last.

The rain pelts harder and Pandora raises her shield as if to a hail of bullets, imagining herself battling alongside Fox in the coming war. She loves him so endlessly she'd *die* for him, she vows, as she lunges towards the precarious stairway.

Thunder rips through the world, a sound so immense it might be one of the sky towers tumbling down. Pandora unhooks the little brass bugle she keeps on her belt, waits for the thunder to fade, then blows the hardest blast she can muster.

At last, Fox looks down.

'The boats,' he shouts. 'Pan, come and see!'

Pandora pulls dripping locks of hair from amazed green eyes. The great wall that makes an ocean fortress of the sky city, and traps the netherworld in gloom, is the only horizon she has ever known. She has never seen the boat camp beyond, only imagined it clinging like a crop of barnacles to the other side of the wall.

Over the years she and Fox have listened to the crackling voices on the soundwaves: flood refugees telling desperate stories of their survival on the oceans. They are *her* people, thinks Pandora, because her lost family must have been boat refugees. Fox chose his netherworld exile; he fled his home in the sky city above to launch the revolution that will soon shake the world. But how did *she* come to be here? Pandora has no memory of family or a life beyond the wall.

For now, the boat people cling in wretched anchorage around the Earth's sky cities, barricaded under gun shields, crafting weapons from sea junk for the battle ahead. At least, Pandora hopes so. Their communications with the boat camps died in the mighty winter storms. Searching the hissing desolation of the soundwaves, listening for a pulsebeat of the outside world, Pandora has imagined the boat people all swept away.

Step by trembling step, she now begins to climb up the precarious, twisting stairway towards Fox – who takes a sudden leap across empty space and vanishes through an archway.

Pandora searches the darkness. A tiny parapet encircles the top of the spire. *Is that where he went?* The wind pounds her, fear drums inside, but she climbs on.

'Here.'

His voice is suddenly close. Sheet lightning turns the sky as bright as the moon and Pandora glimpses his ghostly figure

in an archway, just above. One last heart-stopping twist of the stairway . . . a few more terrifying steps . . .

'Take my hand,' shouts Fox. Rain streams from his outstretched arm. Sweat steams from his skin.

If she misjudges the jump, Pandora will follow her lost sword down into the netherworld sea. But she grabs Fox's hand, leaps through the archway – and lands on the narrow parapet at the top of the spire, safe in his grasp.

Lightning flickers across their drowned kingdom, illuminating the cathedral that seems to float as an ark in the netherworld sea and the broken bridge that lunges from the water like a lagoon monster, draped in seaweed and barnacled with ancient rust-heaps. All around the old steeple tower and the water-glugged museum, scattered among the massive trunks of the sky towers, lie the last scraps of a city lost to the sea: tiny mud-banked land-scraps, crammed with trees and ruins, teeming with animal life. Enclosing it all is the vast city wall.

'Look,' urges Fox.

Beyond the wall, as far as she can see, is an immense heaving darkness.

The world's ocean!

And out on that violent ocean are the jostling shadows of the boats. Lightning turns their metal gun shields into the scales of slumbering sea dragons.

'So many!'

A smile breaks on Fox's drenched face. 'Not just here. Outside every sky city in the world . . .'

A silver pathway stretches out across the ocean and ends abruptly in the darkness.

'The eastern sea bridge,' murmurs Pandora. Fox has schooled her well in the workings of the sky empire.

The bridge project to link the sky cities of Eurosea was abandoned after the slave breakout of 2100 that brought Fox to the netherworld. That was when the gates in the city wall were sealed. No ship or refugee has breached the walls since. Now, food supplies from the vast ocean farms and floating greenhouses and all trade between cities comes by the airships that land on the roofs of the sky towers.

'I heard whispers on the soundwaves,' says Fox, his voice a warm huskiness in her ear. 'Voices so faint they might have come from the stars. It was our boat people. I had to see them, just once, with my own eyes.'

Pandora looks up at the billowing darkness that has smothered all the stars. Never have they known a winter so wild. Barricaded in the tower, she couldn't see how the boat people out on the wild ocean could survive.

Somehow, they have.

Fox grips her hand as they gaze out at the seething black ocean. 'Whatever happens now, whatever we have to do, Pan, remember this moment. *This* is what we're fighting for, all those people out there.' He pauses for a heartbeat. 'And for the others, wherever they are.'

His last words are almost lost in the howl of the storm. But Pandora hears the break in his voice and knows he's thinking not only of the refugees around the sky cities of the world, but of those who fled in the 2100 exodus of ships that went North. The memory of that day is burned into Pandora, as it is also in Fox.

She remembers swimming towards the fleet of white ships, too small to keep up with the other urchins. Seaweed clung to her, clamping her legs. She couldn't break free. The netherworld would not let her go. By the time she crawled on to a mudbank, choking on seawater, the ships were surging

out through the gates in the wall. And she was left behind, a lone little urchin, grubbing around in the mud and ruins. But then Fox, with the soft face of a man-boy and eyes full of fire and broken dreams, found her and brought her to live in the crumbling tower with the wise old woman, Candleriggs, who mothered Pandora and guided Fox in his revolution, until she died.

Pandora drags her gaze from the mass of boats to Fox's handsome, rain-streamed face. Her heart leaps as she understands why he has smashed his way up into the spire and why he speaks, now, of the ones who fled North.

Fox is as charged as the electric wind.

'Is this it? Is it all beginning, Fox? Now, at last?'

Excitement jolts through her, as if a bolt of lightning has hit the tip of the spire.

'As soon as the storms settle and the soundwaves clear. Once the radios are back up and running . . .' Fox pulls her close in a rare, fierce embrace that Pandora yearns for more than anything in the world. 'Then the global Surge begins.'