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Opening extract from

The Great Galloon: Voyage to the Volcano

Written by

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It was always chilly on the deck of the Great Galloon. Despite the braziers burning, temperatures never seemed to reach much above nippy, rising to parky in places. It was chilly because the Galloon spent most of its time miles up in the sky, where the air is very thin indeed. But today it was different. Today it was *really* cold.

The Galloon was encrusted with ice – the rigging was brittle with it, the sails were heavy with it, and the decks were so shiny with it that they had the look of expensive pieces of furniture, polished up for a vicar's visit. For today the Great Galloon, the fantastical and gargantuan craft of Captain Meredith Anstruther, was further north and higher in the sky than it had been for a long time.

Stanley and Rasmussen were sitting on top of the

huge figurehead, right at the front of the gigantic vessel. His name was Claude, and he was a winged tiger of immense size. Legend had it that if the Galloon or its Captain were ever in mortal peril Claude would fly to the rescue, but then legend had a lot of things that were clearly nonsense. Stanley knew that the Galloon had been in mortal peril more times than anyone could remember, and yet Claude remained in his place, wings outstretched, mouth open, a danger only to the occasional pigeon that didn't get out of the way in time. But his head made a magnificent viewing platform, if you were brave enough to clamber out over the rail from the main deck, which of course Stanley was, with a little coaxing from his good friend, Rasmussen.

Holding onto one ear each, they craned to see the landscape scooting by below them. Jutting from the clouds only a few hundred metres away, were rocky crags, razor-sharp cliffs, and snow-capped summits like the teeth of a world-eating shark. The Galloon was skimming along, at a fair old rate of knots, above the highest and coldest mountain range for many thousands of miles around – the fabled Eisberg Mountains.

'And that must be Castle Eisberg!' cried Rasmussen, her voice just carrying to where Stanley stood, before the wind whipped it away. She was nodding her head and pointing with her eyebrows towards a crag on the mountainside.

Stanley squinted. After a moment he glimpsed a green turret, which almost immediately disappeared in the cloud. Then a tumbledown tower revealed itself, still a long way off, before disappearing again. The ringing of a distant bell told them that someone down there had probably seen them too. Still clinging to Claude's huge wooden ear, Stanley leaned forward, to peer more closely.

'It's quite . . . small,' he said thoughtfully. A stretch of crumbling crenellations appeared, before sinking into the fog again, as if the world-eating shark was diving for the hunt.

'And quite . . . broken,' said Rasmussen, also leaning forward dangerously.

'Hmmm. I can see two people running around on top. What's that they've got?' mused Stanley, almost to himself.

'A caber?' said Rasmussen. 'A huge fencepost? A tree trunk?'

They watched through gaps in the clouds, as tiny figures seemed to be manoeuvring a long, heavy object around on the castle battlements.

'A big stick?' said Stanley. 'A gigantic pencil?'

By now both of them were leaning so far forward that they were on tiptoes, with only Claude and the clouds below them.

'Here we go,' said Rasmussen. 'Something's happening.

They seem to have it where they want it, and a flash has come out the end. Some kind of firework perhaps?'

'Cannonball,' said Stanley calmly, as the object flashed again.

'Don't be silly. It's much too big and long to be a cannonball. It's more like a cannon, if anything. Oh, I see.'

Stanley was now pointing with one hand, while clinging onto Claude with the other.

'Cannonball,' he said again thoughtfully.

Way below and in front of the Galloon, a tiny round object was creating a vortex as it whipped through the clouds. Rasmussen peered even harder, and Stanley heard her say, 'Ooooh yeeeah,' under her breath in a kind of mildly interested way, before the whole world tipped up.

There was a noise like a tree snapping, and Stanley wrapped both legs around Claude's ear, as the whole Galloon pitched sharply to the right. Or did it? Turning frantically to see what had caused the movement, it seemed to Stanley that the rail round the Galloon's foredeck stayed level with the horizon, which was odd.

Still clinging on, Stanley turned to Rasmussen, to remark on this strange turn of events, and to express his hope that this silly cannonball business wouldn't get in the way of a good adventure. But his words

never came. He saw Rasmussen grasping for Claude's ear, as she tried desperately to keep her balance. For a few seconds, she was untethered, surfing through the clouds on a huge tiger's head, with a manic grin on her face, before the wind took her coat. She lost her balance, and tumbled backwards into the empty air.

Stanley heard her shout, 'Weeee!' as she went.

'Rasmusseeeen!' he shouted, slightly self-consciously. He stared dumbly at the place where she had been, by Claude's enormous wooden ear. It seemed to flicker as Stanley blinked back tears. There was a noise that sounded like 'poot', as if a giant wooden tiger was spitting out a red-hot cannonball. And then there was just the wind.

Many decks below, in one of the Galloon's map rooms, Captain Anstruther was pouring coffee and poring over charts of the Eisberg Mountains.

'Descending, three hundred feet per minute, yawing left eight degrees,' he muttered.

'Erm . . .' said Clamdigger, the lanky cabin boy and

general factotum on the Galloon, who was standing by the door ready to be useful. He held up a finger as if testing the wind, before remembering he was indoors.

'I could check for you, sir?' he suggested.

'What?' said the Captain, looking up at him with red-rimmed eyes. 'No, no. No need, thank yer, Clam. Wasn't asking, as it happens. We must be over Castle Eisberg now, near as nuts, so we'll be getting ready to moor up.' And he went back to looking at the chart in front of him. Clamdigger had been craning his neck to see which chart it was, and which bit of it was holding the Captain's attention, but from where he stood he could only make out contour lines and blue shading.

'Odd little jolt there, though. And she feels a fraction out of kilter,' said the Captain in the same distracted tone. 'Any ideas?'

Clamdigger knew better than to interrupt his train of thought a second time, so he stood where he was and waited. The Captain looked tired, his cheeks greyer, his eyes redder than before. He had always been a slightly distant figure, but nowadays he restricted himself to the odd enquiry about the Galloon's welfare, and very little else. Two months had passed since the Captain's brother Zebediah had made off with his beautiful young bride-to-be, and in that time the Captain had lost a good deal of weight, although none

of his imposing presence. Clamdigger risked a look at the Captain, who was still bent over his charts, but quickly snapped his gaze back to the middle distance when the Captain spoke again.

'Any ideas, I say?' he said, at which point Clamdigger realised the question was not rhetorical, but aimed at him.

'Oh, err. A loose sheet? Bird strike? Turbulence?' he said.

'Hmm. Could be,' rumbled the Captain, obviously unconvinced.

'Cosmic dust? Raiders? Ice on the rigging?' said Clamdigger, grinding to a halt.

'Felt like . . . but no,' said Captain Anstruther. 'No doubt someone will tell me in good time. Ah!'

This last word was said with a slight smile of satisfaction, but before Clamdigger could wonder why, the door handle beside him began to rattle as someone tried to open it. It wasn't locked, but it was stiff, so Clamdigger lent a hand from the inside. As he did so, the door burst open, and a stick-thin figure in a sky-blue uniform burst through, tripped over his own feet, and grabbed hold of the nearest object to steady himself.

Unfortunately, the nearest object was a tray of decanters which had been set on the huge map table that dominated the room. The new arrival, still unbalanced, found himself trying to counterbalance this surprising new addition to

his person. He teetered about the room for a few moments, emitting quiet woohoos of surprise, before Clamdigger stepped in and whipped the tray off him. Thus unencumbered, Able Skyman Abel, for it was he, grabbed the back of a tall chair and righted himself at last. He looked urgently about, then glared at Clamdigger.

'A cheap trick, Master Clamdigger. I would expect better of you. But I was, as ever, one step ahead.'

'I was trying . . .' began Clamdigger, but Abel had already turned smartly on a heel to face the Captain.

'Cannonball, was it?' said the Captain.

'Sir, I have to report that at seven hundred hours ack emma . . . oh. Yes, sir, a cannonball.'

'Perhaps the Count has not completely forgiven me, as I'd hoped,' said the Captain, still staring intently at his charts.

'Forgiven you, sir? I thought you were old school pals?' said Abel.

'Oh, we are. Sat together every day for twelve years. Inseparable, we were. And later on I was his best man, you know. But, also there has been animosity on occasion.' said the Captain, still not looking up.

'Animosity?' said Clamdigger, to another glare from Abel. 'I thought that was saved for . . .'

'Zebediah?' said the Captain. 'Yes. It's time the Count and I put our differences behind us. It all seems a bit silly now.'

'What's the Count of Eisberg got to forgive you for, anyway?' asked Clamdigger.

'I don't think we need to go into that at the moment, Jack,' said Abel, using Clamdigger's first name, as he did when he wanted to seem fatherly. 'The Captain doesn't want to share his life story with a bloomin' cabin boy.'

The Captain shifted awkwardly in his seat, and looked between them.

'So,' he said. 'Any damage done? By this cannonball?'

Abel jumped to attention. 'No, sir – that's the thing. We tracked it on its way up here, then it just seemed to disappear, sir. Just at the point when it should have hit. Somewhere around the bows. Ms Huntley is on her way to conduct an inspection, but we've heard no reports of any damage done. Very odd.'

'The bows, you say?' said the Captain. 'Hmm. Everyone accounted for?'

'Of course! I'd soon hear if anyone went overboard,' said Abel. 'All present and correct, and if so-called Count Whatsisname tries his cannonball trick again we'll be ready for him. By gosh, we'll . . .'

But Clamdigger didn't hear what Abel planned to do. With a huge crash, a red-hot cannonball smashed through the window. It screamed across the room, spun the Captain's hat round on his head, ricocheted off a

battered suit of armour, and embedded itself in the oaken table. The decanters that Abel had worked so hard to save fell to the floor, where they joined the broken window glass strewn across the boards. Abel screamed a high C-sharp, and Clamdigger ducked behind the door. The Captain hauled himself from his seat, righted his hat and took a sip of coffee.

'You were wrong about the cannonball,' he said to Abel, as a look of amazement crossed his face. 'And you were wrong about the crew. Look!'

They ran to the window and, there, hanging by the hood of her coat from one of Claude's enormous outstretched claws, was Rasmussen. Her hair was streaming out behind her, and her face was set in a rictus grin. Icicles were forming on her teeth. Abel stammered. The Captain boomed. Clamdigger ran to the suit of armour, and grabbed the pikestaff from its fist. With this fearsome weapon in his hands, he turned carefully, and poked all eleven feet of it out through the empty window frame. The Captain grabbed the staff as it came past him, and together they tried to move it into a position from where Rasmussen could safely grab it and be pulled back onboard.

'Hold on, my girl!' said Abel weakly as he stood watching the Captain and Clamdigger's attempts. Neither Clamdigger nor the Captain spoke. Clamdigger noticed from the corner of his eye that the Captain's

tongue was sticking out, and he had one eye closed. He wondered vaguely why people did this when they were trying to concentrate, before realising that he was doing it too. Now Rasmussen had seen them, and she was watching the end of the staff waggle around in thin air a few feet from her face, but she was clearly too cold and terrified to move anything more than her eyes.

'The coat, lad . . . hook . . . the coat . . .' said the Captain through gritted teeth, as he leaned back with the very end of the staff under his armpit.

'No!' called Abel from behind them. 'The dress! More sturdy – the coat's only done up with toggles, a very unsound fastening!'

The Captain and Clamdigger looked at each other and nodded in agreement. Clamdigger leaned as far out of the window as he dared. The air was bitterly cold, and it stung his eyes as he squinted hard, desperate not to lose sight of Rasmussen for one moment. The staff was now close to her, but dipping too low. The Captain had his feet braced on the window frame either side of Clamdigger, who was using all of his wiry strength to bring it up to Rasmussen's level so they could hook her free, or she could grab on, or . . . what? He wasn't really sure, but they had to keep trying.

'Up a bit!' squeaked Abel, leaning transfixed from the next window.

The Captain made a noise that may have been a

grunt of effort, or may have been a growl. Clamdigger redoubled his efforts, and finally had the far end, the sharp end, of the pikestaff waggling around just inches below Rasmussen's dangling feet.

'Can't get it . . . any higher . . . Cap'n,' he said over his shoulder. As he did so, Rasmussen let out a squeal that was most unlike her.

'Drop, girl!' shouted the Captain, and Clamdigger heard Abel let out a squeal of his own.

'We'll catch you!' the Captain continued, bellowing at the top of his mighty lungs. 'And if we don't, Claude will!'

Clamdigger had no time to wonder what this meant. With his tongue still sticking out, and his arms now feeling as if they were about to snap in two, he watched in awe as Rasmussen looked down at the waving bill-hook below her, and then up at Claude's mighty claw. She reached up oh so carefully, and Clamdigger's heart was in his mouth as he saw her trying to rip the hood of her fleece-lined parka – the only thing keeping her up here, in the freezing air over the jagged peaks of a hostile mountain range. She tugged, and then she tugged again. The hood held fast. To Clamdigger's streaming eyes, it seemed as if there was a slight flicker, and then Rasmussen was falling. Clamdigger closed his eyes, gripped the pikestaff even tighter and lunged.

* * *

Stanley was making good progress. When Rasmussen had first disappeared into thin air, he had done the first thing that the situation seemed to demand – he had stared blankly at the place where she had been, and done a little laugh.

'Haha!' he had said, just after he had said, 'Rasmusseeeen!'

But then he had sprung into action. He had crept from Claude's head, clambered over the rail, and hailed the nearest Galloonier. Together they had raised the alarm, and now the whole for'ard section of the Galloon was abustle. Rescue parties and life balloons were being launched, and bells were clanging as Stanley ran to find the Captain, or Ms Huntley, or someone who could stop the Galloon's progress and co-ordinate the rescue. He had negotiated seven flights of stairs, two fireman's poles, a hand-cranked freight lift and a wooden cargo chute just to get onto the right deck, and even then he had been hundreds of yards away from his destination, but now he was running down the corridor that led to the Captain's map room, with Gallooniers shouting directions and encouragement as he went. An old hand called Tarheel, who was running the other way with a length of rope in his arms, turned as Stanley passed him.

'Never lost a man yet!' he said, with a forced grin.

Yes, thought Stanley, *but Rasmussen is not a man*. His heart was beating in his throat as he approached

the door to the map room. Surely the Captain wouldn't ignore this situation as he had ignored the recent affair of the all-consuming monster moths until the last possible moment? He stood before the brass plate that said 'Here Be Mappes', and composed himself. It was easy to tell yourself that onboard the Galloon, nothing could ever truly go wrong, but of course this was not the case. Stanley swallowed hard, and knocked.

'Come in!' said a sonorous voice within, so Stanley opened the door a crack. There was the Captain, as awe-inspiring as ever, sitting at the head of the green baize map table, scrutinising a huge map of the Eisberg Mountains. Beside him stood Able Skyman Abel, who seemed to be inspecting a dent in the Captain's enormous hat. As Stanley stepped into the room, he noticed that the freezing wind was whistling in through broken windows, and broken glass crunched underfoot. A large iron ball was embedded in the wood of the table, which was smoking with the heat that came from it. Behind the table, Clamdigger was standing and smiling. Beside him, sitting in a leather-backed chair, toasting a crumpet in the heat from the cannonball, was Rasmussen. She looked dishevelled but happy, and as Stanley came in, she gave him her trademark infuriating wink.

'Hello, slowcoach,' she said. At this, Able Skyman Abel looked up at Stanley and frowned.

'Ah, Sidney,' he said. 'I imagine you've come to tell

us of this young lady's mishap. But fear not – I . . . er . . . we had the situation in hand throughout. Kindly run along and report to Ms Huntley that our little escapee is safely back onboard, and that the bells can cease to clang. The Captain is trying to concentrate. Best tell Her Grace the Countess as well, so she can start getting young madam ready for the ball. Hurry up, lad, no time for slouching and gawping.'

'Yes,' said Rasmussen, stuffing crumpet into her mouth and swinging her feet up onto the table. 'Hurry along, Sidney, there's a good chap.'

Back on deck a short while later, Stanley was trying to stay out of the way as he watched the loose conglomeration of people that made up the crew of the Great Galloon working together as only they could. Having not grown up onboard, Stanley still didn't take for granted the fact that everyone on the Galloon was there of their own free will, under no obligation, and free to do as they pleased.

The fact that what it pleased them all to do was to work together for the Galloon's greater good was testament to the loyalty that Captain Anstruther inspired in all who knew him.

Stanley was huddled in his scarf and gloves, tucked in beside the Galloon's main funnel. At this hour the funnel was warm with the smoke coming up from the

great furnace, and so this was the prime spot on deck. He watched as a gang of wiry old hands erected netting all around the Galloon, to minimise any damage from future cannonballs. He heard a far-off clatter, which he knew to be the anchor crews lowering the mighty ice anchors, and he felt that familiar glow of satisfaction that came with being part of such a magnificent thing as the Galloon.

As Stanley sat watching the hustle and bustle all around him, he heard a noise – a whistle and a whoosh together, like a firework. Beyond the netting, in the snow-burgeoning sky, a flare of some sort exploded, and a shower of dark grey ash spread out across the clouds. Stanley was interested but not shocked, until the cloud of ash began to form itself into recognisable words. In a firm Teutonic hand, the firework writing relayed its message to the Captain, and by extension all aboard the Great Galloon:

> My birthday ball is cancelled due to too much interest. Please leave. We apologise for any inconvenience caused. Eisberg.

And then the ashen words fell apart and drifted to earth. Stanley was confused.

'*Too much* interest?' he said to himself, and jumped when a voice beside him responded.

'Poppycock!' said Clamdigger, who had appeared, to warm his long fingers on the funnel. 'The Captain will have something to say about that.'

And indeed he did – far behind them on the quarterdeck, his great hat framed against the white sky, his mouth to the huge brass speaking trumpet, rigged up to tubes around the ship for just such moments as these, the Captain spoke to his crew.

'Poppycock!' he said. 'We've come for a ball, and by hook or by crook a ball we shall have. It is imperative. Gallooniers, prepare a landing party – Ms Peele and Her Grace the Countess, in the first instance, I think.'

A ragged cheer sprung up in the rigging, and was then taken up across the ship. Stanley was surprised at the force of the Captain's words. He didn't cheer, being lost in thought as he so often was.

Corks, he thought. *Perhaps this is the start of that adventure we've been waiting for . . .*

And with that thought on his mind, he scratched his horn, blew on his hands, and strode off to find his best friend Rasmussen.