

BEHEMOTH

Written by

MR. SCOTT WESTERFELD

Illustrated by Mr. Keith Thompson

SIMON PULSE

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• BEHEMOTH •



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To Justine:

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Alek raised his sword. "On guard, sir!"

Deryn hefted her own weapon, studying Alek's pose. His feet were splayed at right angles, his left arm sticking out behind like the handle of a teacup. His fencing armor made him look like a walking quilt. Even with his sword pointed straight at her, he looked barking silly.

"Do I have to stand like *that*?" she asked.

"If you want to be a proper fencer, yes."

"A proper idiot, more like," Deryn muttered, wishing again that her first lesson were someplace less public. A dozen crewmen were watching, along with a pair of curious hydrogen sniffers. But Mr. Rigby, the bosun, had forbidden swordplay inside the airship.

She sighed, raised her saber, and tried to imitate Alek's pose.

It was a fine day on the *Leviathan's* topside, at least. The airship had left the Italian peninsula behind last night, and the flat sea stretched in all directions, the afternoon sun scattering diamonds across its surface. Seagulls wheeled overhead, carried by the cool ocean breeze.

Best of all, there were no officers up here to remind Deryn that she was on duty. Two German ironclad warships were rumored to be skulking nearby, and Deryn was meant to be watching for signals from Midshipman Newkirk, who was dangling from a Huxley ascender two thousand feet above them.

But she wasn't really dawdling. Only two days before, Captain Hobbes had ordered her to keep an eye on Alek, to learn what she could. Surely a secret mission from the captain himself outweighed her normal duties.

Maybe it was daft that the officers still thought of Alek and his men as enemies, but at least it gave Deryn an excuse to spend time with him.

"Do I look like a ninny?" she asked Alek.

"You do indeed, Mr. Sharp."

"Well, you do too, then! Whatever they call ninnies in Clanker-talk."

"The word is '*Dummkopf*'" he said. "But *I* don't look like one, because my stance isn't dreadful."

He lowered his saber and came closer, adjusting Deryn's limbs as if she were a dummy in a show window.

"More weight on your back foot," he said, nudging her boots farther apart. "So you can push off when you attack."

Alek was right behind her now, his body pressing close as he adjusted her sword arm. She hadn't realized this fencing business would be so touchy.

He grasped her waist, sending a crackle across her skin.

If Alek moved his hands any higher, he might notice what was hidden beneath her careful tailoring.

"Always keep sideways to your opponent," he said, gently turning her. "That way, your chest presents the smallest possible target."

"Aye, the smallest possible target," Deryn sighed. Her secret was safe, it seemed.

Alek stepped away and resumed his own pose, so that the tips of their swords almost touched. Deryn took a deep breath, ready to fight at last.

But Alek didn't move. Long seconds passed, the airship's new engines thrumming beneath their feet, the clouds slipping slowly past overhead.

"Are we going to fight?" Deryn finally asked. "Or just *stare* each other to death?"

“Before a fencer crosses swords, he has to learn this basic stance. But don’t worry”—Alek smiled cruelly—“we won’t be here more than an hour. It’s only your first lesson, after all.”

“What? A whole barking hour ... without moving?” Deryn’s muscles were already complaining, and she could see the crewmen stifling their laughter. One of the hydrogen sniffers crept forward to snuffle her boot.

“This is nothing,” Alek said. “When I first started training with Count Volger, he wouldn’t even let me hold a sword!”

“Well, that sounds like a daft way to teach someone sword fighting.”

“Your body has to learn the proper stance. Otherwise you’ll fall into bad habits.”

Deryn snorted. “You’d think that in a fight *not moving* might be a bad habit! And if we’re just standing here, why are you wearing armor?”

Alek didn’t answer, just narrowed his eyes, his saber motionless in the air. Deryn could see her own sword point wavering. She set her teeth.

Of course, barking *Prince* Alek would have been taught how to fight in the proper way. From what she could tell, his whole life had been a procession of tutors. Count Volger, his fencing master, and Otto Klopp, his master of mechanics, might be the only teachers with him now that he was on the run. But back when he’d lived in the Hapsburg family castle, there must have been a dozen more, all of them cramming Alek’s attic with yackum: ancient languages, parlor manners, and Clanker superstitions. No wonder he thought that standing about like a pair of coatracks was educational.

But Deryn wasn’t about to let some stuck-up prince outlast her.

So she stood there glaring at him, perfectly still. As the minutes stretched out, her body stiffened, her muscles beginning to throb. And it was worse inside her brain, boredom twisting into anger and frustration, the rumble of the airship’s Clanker engines turning her head into a beehive.

The trickiest part was holding Alek’s stare. His dark green eyes stayed locked on hers, unwavering as his sword point. Now that she knew Alek’s secrets—the murder of his parents, the pain of leaving home behind, the cold weight of his family squabbles starting this awful war—Deryn could see the sadness behind that gaze.

At odd moments she could see tears brightening Alek’s eyes, only a fierce, relentless pride holding them back. And sometimes when they competed over stupid things, like who could climb the ratlines fastest, Deryn almost wanted to let him win.

But she could never say these things aloud, not as a boy, and Alek would never meet her eyes like this again, if he ever learned she was a girl.

“Alek ...,” she began.

“Need a rest?” His smirk wiped her charitable thoughts away.

“Get stuffed,” she said. “I was just wondering, what’ll you Clankers do when we get to Constantinople?”

The point of Alek’s sword wavered for a moment. “Count Volger will think of something. We’ll leave the city as soon as possible, I expect. The Germans will never look for me in the wilds of the Ottoman Empire.”

Deryn glanced at the empty horizon ahead. The *Leviathan* might reach Constantinople by dawn tomorrow, and she’d met Alek only six days ago. Would he really be gone so quickly?

“Not that it’s so bad here,” Alek said. “The war feels farther away than it ever did in Switzerland. But I can’t stay up in the air forever.”

“No, I reckon you can’t,” Deryn said, focusing her gaze on their sword points. The captain might not know who Alek’s father had been, but it was obvious the boy was Austrian. It was only a matter of time before Austria-Hungary was officially at war with Britain, and then the captain would never let the Clankers leave.

It hardly seemed fair, thinking of Alek as an enemy after he'd saved the airship—two times now. Once from an icy death, by giving them food, and the second time from the Germans, by handing over the engines that had allowed them all to escape.

The Germans were still hunting Alek, trying to finish the job they'd started on his parents. *Someone* had to be on his side....

And, as Deryn had gradually admitted to herself these last few days, she didn't mind if the someone wound up being her.

A fluttering in the sky caught her attention, and Deryn let her aching sword arm drop.

"Hah!" Alek said. "Had enough?"

"It's Newkirk," she said, trying to work out the boy's frantic signals.

The semaphore flags whipped through the letters once more, and slowly the message formed in her brain.

"Two sets of smokestacks, forty miles away," she said, reaching for her command whistle. "It's the German ironclads!"

She found herself smiling a little as she blew—Constantinople might have to wait a squick.

The alarm howl spread swiftly, passing from one hydrogen sniffer to the next. Soon the whole airship rang with the beasties' cries.

Crewmen crowded the spine, setting up air guns and taking feed bags to the fléchette bats. Sniffers scampered across the ratlines, checking for leaks in the *Leviathan's* skin.

Deryn and Alek cranked the Huxley's winch, drawing Newkirk down closer to the ship.

"We'll leave him at a thousand feet," Deryn said, watching the altitude markings on the rope. "That's a lucky sod. You can see the whole battle from up there!"

"But it won't be much of a battle, will it?" Alek asked. "What can an airship do to a pair of ironclads?"

"My guess is, we'll stay absolutely still for an hour. Just so we don't fall into any bad habits."

Alek rolled his eyes. "I'm serious, Dylan. The *Leviathan* has no heavy guns. How do we fight them?"

"A big hydrogen breather can do plenty. We've got a few aerial bombs left, and fléchette bats ..."

Deryn's words faded. "Did you just say 'we'?"

"Pardon me?"

"You just said, 'How do *we* fight them?' Like you were one of us!"

"I suppose I might have." Alek looked down at his boots. "My men and I *are* serving on this ship after all, even if you are a bunch of godless Darwinists."

Deryn smiled again as she secured the Huxley's cable. "I'll make sure to mention that to the captain, next time he asks if you're a Clanker spy."

"How kind of you," Alek said, then raised his eyes to meet hers. "But that's a good point—will the officers trust us in battle?"

"Why wouldn't they? You saved the ship—gave us engines from your Stormwalker!"

"Yes, but if I hadn't been so generous, we'd still be stuck on that glacier with you. Or in a German prison, more likely. It wasn't exactly out of friendship."

Deryn frowned. Maybe things *were* a squick more complicated now, what with a battle coming up. Alek's men and the *Leviathan's* crew had become allies almost by accident, and only a few days ago.

"You only promised to help us get to the Ottoman Empire, I suppose," she said softly. "Not to fight other Clankers."

Alek nodded. "That's what your officers will be thinking."

“Aye, but what are *you* thinking?”

“We’ll follow orders.” He pointed toward the bow. “See that? Klopp and Hoffman are already working.”

It was true. The engine pods on either side of the great beastie’s head were roaring louder, sending two thick columns of exhaust into the air. But to see the Clanker engines on a Darwinist airship was just another reminder of the strange alliance the *Leviathan* had entered into. Compared to the tinny British-made engines the ship was designed to carry, they sounded and smoked like freight trains.

“Maybe this is a chance to prove yourself,” Deryn said. “You should go lend your men a hand. We’ll need good speed to catch those ironclads by nightfall.” She clapped him on the shoulder. “But don’t get yourself killed.”

“I’ll try not to.” Alek smiled and gave her a salute. “Good luck, Mr. Sharp.”

He turned and ran forward along the spine.

Watching him go, Deryn wondered what officers down on the bridge were thinking. Here was the *Leviathan*, entering battle with new and barely tested engines, run by men who should by all rights be fighting on the other side.

But the captain didn’t have much choice, did he? He could either trust the Clankers or drift helplessly in the breeze. And Alek and his men had to join the fight or they’d lose their only allies. Nobody seemed to have much choice, come to think of it.

Deryn sighed, wondering how this war had got so muddled.

As he ran toward the engines, Alek wondered if he'd told Dylan the whole truth.

It felt wrong, hurrying to join this attack. Alek and his men had fought Germans—even fellow Austrians—a dozen times while fleeing to Switzerland. But this was different—these ironclads weren't hunting him.

According to wireless broadcasts that Count Volger had overheard, the two ships had been trapped in the Mediterranean at the start of the war. With the British in control of Gibraltar and the Suez Canal, there'd been no way for them to get back to Germany. They'd been running for the past week.

Alek knew what it felt like to be hounded, trapped in a fight that someone else had started. But he was, ready to help the Darwinists send two ships full of living, breathing men to the bottom of the sea.

The vast beast rolled under his feet, the tendrils that covered its flanks undulating like windblown grass, pulling it into a slow turn. Fabricated birds swirled around Alek, some already harnessed and carrying instruments of war.

That was another difference. This time he was fighting side by side with these creatures. Alek had been raised to believe they were godless abominations, but after four days aboard the airship, the squawks and cries had begun to sound natural. Except for the awful fléchette bats, fabricated beasts could even seem beautiful.

Was he turning into a Darwinist?

When he reached the spine above the engine pods, Alek headed down the port side ratlines. The airship was tilting into a climb, the sea falling away below him. The ropes were slick with salty air, and as he strained to keep from falling, questions of loyalty fled his mind.

By the time he reached the engine pod, Alek was soaked in sweat and wishing he hadn't worn his fencing armor.

Otto Klopp was at the controls, his Hapsburg Guard uniform looking tattered after six weeks away from home. Beside him stood Mr. Hirst, the *Leviathan's* chief engineer, who was studying the roaring machine with a measure of distaste. Alek had to admit, churning pistons and spitting glow plugs looked bizarre beside the undulating flank of the airbeast, like gears attached to a butterfly's wings.

"Master Klopp," Alek shouted over the roar. "How's she running?"

The old man looked up from the controls. "Smoothly enough, for this speed. Do you know what's going on?"

Of course, Otto Klopp spoke hardly any English. Even if a message lizard had brought the news up to the pod, he wouldn't know why the airship was changing course. All he'd seen were color codes flashed from the bridge to the signal patch, orders to be obeyed.

"We've spotted two German ironclads." Alek paused—had he said "we" again? "The ship is giving chase."

Klopp frowned, chewing on the news for a moment, then shrugged. "Well, the Germans haven't done us any favors lately. But it's also true, young master, that we could blow a piston at any time."

Alek looked away into the spinning gears. The newly rebuilt engines were still cantankerous, with unexpected problems always cropping up. The crew would never know if a temporary breakdown were intentional.

But this was no time to betray their new allies.

For all the talk of Alek saving the *Leviathan*, the airship had really saved him. His father's plan had

been for Alek to hide in the Swiss Alps for the entire war, emerging only to reveal his secret—that he was heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary. The airship's crash landing had rescued him from long years of skulking in the snow.

He owed the Darwinists for saving him, and for trusting his men to run these engines.

"Let's hope that doesn't happen, Otto."

"As you say, sir."

"Anything wrong?" Mr. Hirst asked.

Alek switched to English. "Not at all. Master Klopp says she's running smoothly. I believe Cour Volger is assigned to the starboard engine crew. Shall I stay here and translate for you two?"

The chief engineer handed Alek a pair of goggles to protect his eyes from sparks and wind. "Please do. We wouldn't want any ... misunderstandings in the heat of battle."

"Of course not." Alek pulled on the goggles, wondering if Mr. Hirst had noticed Klopp's hesitation. As the airship's chief engineer, Hirst was a rare Darwinist with an understanding of machines. He always watched Klopp's work on the Clanker engines with admiration, even though the two didn't share a language. There was no point in arousing his suspicions now.

Hopefully this battle would be over quickly, and they could head on to Constantinople without delay.

As night fell, two dark slivers came into view on the horizon.

"The little one's not much to look at," Klopp said, lowering his field glasses.

Alek took the glasses and peered through them. The smaller ironclad was already damaged. One of its gun turrets had been blackened by a fire, and an oil slick spread in the ship's wake, a shimmering black rainbow in the setting sun.

"They've been in a fight already?" he asked Mr. Hirst.

"Aye, the navy's been hunting them all over the Mediterranean. They've been shelled a few times from a distance, but they keep slipping away." The man smiled. "But they won't escape this time."

"They certainly can't outrun us," Alek said. The *Leviathan* had closed a gap of sixty kilometers in a few hours.

"And they can't fight back either," Mr. Hirst said. "We're too high for them to hit. All we have to do is slow them down. The navy's already on its way."

A boom rang out on the spine above, and a swarm of black wings lifted from the front of the airship.

"They're sending in fléchette bats first," Alek said to Klopp.

"What sort of godless creature is that?"

"They eat spikes," was all Alek could say. A shudder passed through him.

The swarm began to muster, forming a black cloud in the air. Searchlights sprang to life on the gondola, and as the sunlight faded, the bats gathered in the beams like moths.

The *Leviathan* had lost countless beasts in her recent battles, but the airship was slowly repairing itself. More bats were already breeding, like a forest recovering after a long hunting season. The Darwinists called the ship an "ecosystem."

From a distance there was something mesmerizing about the way the dark swarm swirled in the searchlights. It coiled toward the smaller ironclad, ready to unleash its rain of metal spikes. Most of the crew would be safe beneath armor plating, but the men at the smaller deck guns would be torn to pieces.

"Why start with bats?" Alek asked Hirst. "Fléchettes won't sink an ironclad."

"No, but they'll shred her signal flags and wireless aerials. If we can keep the two ships from communicating, they're less likely to split up and make a run for it."

Alek translated for Klopp, who pointed a finger into the distance. “The big one’s coming about.”

~~Alek raised the field glasses again, taking a moment to find the larger ship’s silhouette against the darkening horizon. He could just read the name on her side—the *Goeben* looked far more formidable than her companion. She had three big gun turrets and a pair of gyrothopter catapults, and the shape of her wake revealed a set of kraken-fighting arms beneath the surface.~~

On her aft deck stood something strange—a tall tower that bristled with metal rigging, like a dozen wireless transmitters crammed together.

“What’s that on her back side?” Alek asked.

Klopp took the glasses and stared. He’d worked with German forces for years, and usually had a lively opinion on military matters. But now he frowned, his voice hesitant.

“I’m not sure. Reminds me of a toy I once saw ...” Klopp squeezed the glasses tighter. “She’s launching a gyrothopter!”

A small shape hurtled into the air from one of the catapults. It banked hard and came whirring toward the bats.

“What’s he up to?” Klopp asked softly.

Alek watched with a frown on his face. Gyrothopters were fragile machines, barely strong enough to lift a pilot. They were designed for scouting, not attack. But the little aircraft was headed straight into the cloud of bats, its twin rotors spinning wildly.

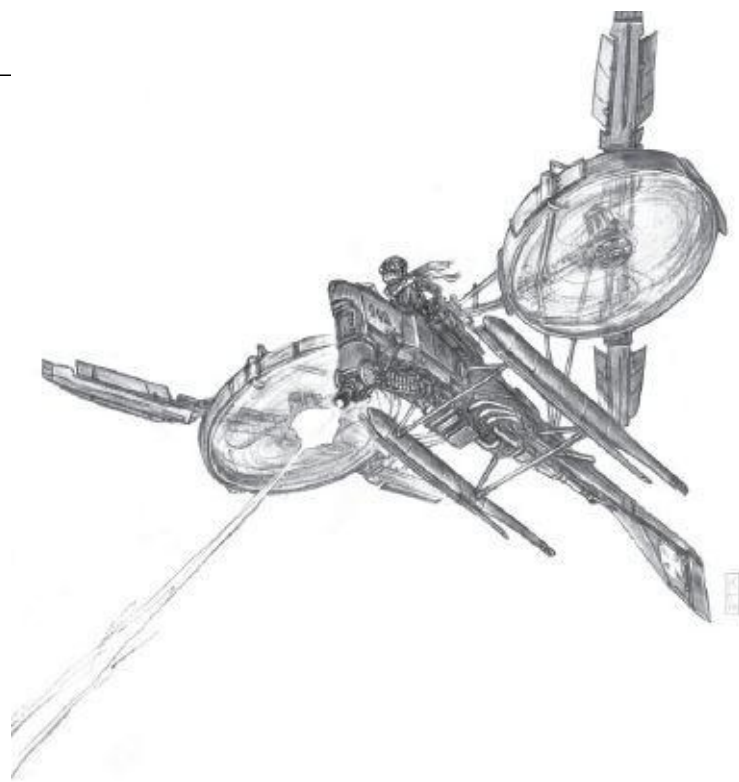
As it neared the fluttering swarm, the gyrothopter suddenly kindled in the darkness. Bolts of flame shot from its front end, a spray of brilliant crimson fireworks that stretched across the sky.

Alek remembered something that Dylan had said about the bats—they were deathly afraid of firelight; it scared the spikes right out of them.

The stream of fire tore through the swarm, scattering bats in all directions. Seconds later the cloud had disappeared, like a black dandelion in a puff of wind.

The gyrothopter tried to veer away, but was caught beneath a wave of fleeing bats. Alek could see the fléchettes falling, glittering in the searchlights, and the gyrothopter began to shudder in midair. The blades of its rotors tore and crumpled, their remaining energy twisting the delicate frame into wreckage.

Alek watched as the flying machine tumbled from the sky, disappearing in a small white splash on the ocean’s dark surface. He wondered if its unlucky pilot had survived the fléchettes long enough to feel the water’s cold.



The *Leviathan's* searchlights

still swept across the sky, but the swarm was too scattered to resume the attack. Small fluttering shapes were already streaming back toward the airship.

Klopp lowered his glasses. "The Germans have some new tricks, it seems."

"They always do," Alek managed, staring at the ripples spreading out from where the gyrocopter had crashed.

"Orders coming in," Mr. Hirst said, pointing at the signal patch. It had turned blue, the sign to slow the engine. Klopp adjusted the controls, giving Alek a questioning look.

"Are we giving up the attack?" Alek asked in English.

"Of course not," Mr. Hirst said. "Just changing course. I reckon we'll ignore the *Breslau* for now and go after the big one. Just to make sure that other gyrocopter doesn't trouble us with those sparklers."

Alek listened to the thrum of the ship for a moment. The starboard engine was still running high, pushing the *Leviathan* into a slow turn toward the *Goeben*. The battle wasn't over yet. More men would die tonight.

He looked back at the whirling gears of the engine. Klopp could halt them in a dozen subtle ways. One word from Alek would be enough to stop this battle.

But he'd promised Dylan to fight loyally. And after throwing away his hiding place, his Stormwalker, and his father's gold to make these Darwinists allies, it seemed absurd to betray them now.

He knew Count Volger would agree. As heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, Alek had a duty to survive. And survival in an enemy camp didn't start with mutiny.

"What happens next?" he asked Hirst.

The chief engineer took the field glasses from Klopp. "We won't waste any more time tearing up their signal flags, that's for certain. We'll probably go straight in with aerial bombs. A gyrocopter can't stop those."

"We're going to bomb them," Alek translated for Klopp. "They're defenseless."

The man just nodded, adjusting the controls. The signal patch was turning red again. The *Leviathan*

had found her course.

It took long minutes to close the final distance to the *Goeben*.

The ship's big guns boomed once, spilling fire and smoke into the night sky. But Mr. Hirst was right—the shells flew well beneath the *Leviathan*, erupting into white columns of water kilometers away.

As the *Leviathan* drew closer, Alek watched the German ship through the field glasses. Men scrambled across the ironclad's decks, hiding her small guns under what looked like heavy black tarps. The coverings shone dully in the last flickers of sunset, like plastic or leather. Alek wondered they were made of some new material strong enough to stop fléchettes.

But no plastic could stop high explosives.

The men on the ironclad hardly seemed worried, though. No lifeboats were readied, and the second gyrothopter stayed on its catapult, the rotors strapped down against the wind. Soon it too was veiled with a glossy black covering.

"Young master," Klopp said, "what's happening on her aft deck?"

Alek swung the field glasses, and saw lights flickering atop the ironclad's strange metal tower.

He squinted harder. There were men working at the tower's base, dressed in uniforms made from the same shiny black that covered the deck guns. They moved slowly, as if encased in a fresh layer of tar.

Alek frowned. "Take a look, Master Klopp. Quickly, please."

As the old man took the field glasses, the flickering lights grew brighter—Alek could see them with his naked eyes now. Shimmers slid along the struts of the tower, like nervous snakes made of lightning....

"Rubber," Alek said softly. "They're protecting everything with rubber. That whole tower must be charged with elektriks."

Klopp swore. "I should have realized. But they only showed us toys and demonstration models—never one that huge!"

"Models of *what*?"

The old man lowered the glasses. "It's a Tesla cannon. A real one."

Alek shook his head. "As in Mr. Tesla, the man who invented wireless? You mean that's transmitting tower?"

"The same Mr. Tesla, young master, but it's not a transmitter." Klopp's face was pale. "It's a weapon, a lightning generator."

Alek stared in horror at the shimmering tower. As Dylan often said, lightning was an airship's natural enemy. If raw elektriks flowed across the airship's skin, even the tiniest hydrogen leak could burst into flame.

"Are we in range yet?"

"The ones I've seen could hardly shoot across a room," Klopp said. "They only tickled your fingers or made your hair stand on end. But that one's *huge*, and it's got the boilers of a dreadnought to power it!"

Alek turned to Mr. Hirst, who was watching their conversation with an air of disinterest, and said in English, "We have to come about! That tower on the aft deck is some kind of ... lightning cannon."

Mr. Hirst raised an eyebrow. "A lightning cannon?"

"Yes! Klopp has worked with the German land forces. He's seen these things before." Alek sighed.

“Well, toy ones, anyway.”

The chief engineer peered down at the *Goeben*. The electriks were sparkling brighter now, unfolding into spidery forms that danced along the tower’s struts.

“Can’t you see?” Alek cried.

“It is rather odd.” Mr. Hirst smiled. “But lightning? I doubt your Clanker friends have mastered the forces of nature just yet.”

“You have to tell the bridge!”

“I’m sure the bridge can see it well enough.” Hirst pulled a command whistle from his pocket and blew a short tune. “But I shall inform them of your theory.”

“My *theory*?” Alek shouted. “We don’t have time for a debate! We have to turn around!”

“What we’ll do is wait for orders,” Mr. Hirst said, dropping the whistle into his pocket.

Alek swallowed a groan of frustration, then turned back to Klopp.

“How long do we have?” he said in German.

“Everyone’s cleared the deck, except for those men in protective suits. So it could be any moment.” Klopp lowered the glasses. “Full reverse on this engine will turn us around fastest.”

“Full reverse from full ahead?” Alek shook his head. “You’ll never make that look like an accident.”

“No, but I can make it look like my own idea,” Klopp said, then grabbed Alek by the collar and shoved him hard to the floor. As Alek’s head cracked against the metal deck of the engine pod, the world went starry for a moment.

“Klopp! What in blazes are you—”

The shriek of gears drowned out Alek’s words, the whole pod shuddering in its frame around him. The air suddenly stilled as the propeller sputtered to a halt.

“What’s the meaning of this!” cried Hirst.

Alek’s vision cleared, and he saw Klopp brandishing a wrench at the chief engineer. With his free hand the old man deftly shifted the engine into reverse, then pushed the foot pedal down.

The propeller sputtered back to life, drawing air backward across the pod.

“Klopp, wait!” Alek began. He tried to stand, but his head spun, and he fell back to one knee.

Blazes! The man had actually *hurt* him!

Hirst was blowing on his whistle again—a high-pitched squeak—and Alek heard a hydrogen sniff howling in response. Soon a pack of the ugly creatures would be thundering down upon them.

Alek pulled himself up, reaching out for the wrench. “Klopp, what are you *doing*?”

The man swung at him, yelling, “Got to make this convincing!”

The wrench whistled over Alek’s head. He ducked and fell back onto one knee again, cursing. Had Klopp gone *mad*?

Mr. Hirst reached into a pocket and pulled out a compressed air pistol.

“No!” Alek cried, leaping for the gun. As his fingers wrapped around Hirst’s wrist, the pistol exploded with a deafening *crack*. The shot missed Klopp, but the bullet rang like an alarm bell as it ricocheted around the engine pod.

Something kicked Alek in the ribs, hard, and searing pain blossomed in his side.

He fell backward, his fingers slipping from Hirst’s wrist, but the man didn’t raise the gun again. Hirst and Klopp both gaped, dumbstruck, at the *Leviathan*’s flank.

Alek blinked away pain and followed their stares. The cilia were in furious motion, rippling like leaves in a storm. The airbeast’s vast length was bending, twisting harder than he’d ever seen. The great harness groaned around them as it stretched, joined by the *pop* of ropes snapping in the ratlines.

“The beast knows it’s in danger,” Klopp said.

Alek watched in wonder as the airship seemed to curl around them in the air. The stars spun

overhead, and soon the huge animal had turned itself entirely around.

~~“Back to full ...,”~~ Alek began, but it hurt too much to speak. Every word was another kick in the ribs. He looked down at his hand pressed against his left side, and saw blood between the fingers.

Klopp was already working, reversing the engine once more. Mr. Hirst clutched his pistol tight, still staring in wonder at the airbeast’s flank.

“Get out of the pod, young master,” Klopp yelled as the propeller’s gears caught again. “It’s meta-
The lightning will jump to it.”

“I don’t think I can.”

Klopp turned. “What ... ?”

“I’m shot.”

The old man dropped the controls and bent beside him, eyes wide. “I’ll lift you.”

“Mind your engine, man!” Alek managed.

“Young master—,” Klopp began, but his words were drowned out by a crackling in the air.

With a painful heave Alek pulled himself up to look backward. The *Goeben* was falling behind them, but the Tesla cannon was blindingly bright. It flickered like a welding lamp, sending jittering shadows across the dark sea.

Beside him the airship’s cilia still seethed and billowed, pushing at the air like a million tiny oars.

Faster, Alek prayed to the giant airbeast.

A great fireball formed at the tower’s base, then swiftly rose, dancing and shimmering as it climbed. When it reached the top, a thunderous *boom* rang out.

Fingers of lightning, jagged and colossal, shot up from the Tesla cannon. They stretched across the whole sky at first, a tree of white fire, then leapt toward the *Leviathan* as if drawn by scent. The lightning spread a fiery web across the airbeast’s skin, a dazzling wave that surged down its length. In an instant the electricity flowed three hundred meters from tail to head, leaping eagerly across the metal struts that supported the engine pod.

The whole pod began to crackle, the gears and pistons flinging out radiant spokes of fire. Alek was seized by an invisible force; every muscle in his body tightened. For a long moment the lightning squeezed the breath from him. Finally its power wilted, and he slipped back to the metal deck.

The engine sputtered to a halt again.

Alek smelled smoke, and felt an awful pounding in his chest. His ribs ached with every heartbeat.

“Young master? Can you hear me?”

Alek forced his eyes open. “I’m all right, Klopp.”

“No, you aren’t,” the man said. “I’ll get you to the gondola.”

Klopp wrapped one big arm around Alek and pulled him up, sending a wave of fresh agony through him.

“God’s wounds, man! That *hurts!*”

Alek wavered on his feet, dumbstruck by the pain. Mr. Hirst didn’t lend a hand, his nervous eyes scanning the length of the *Leviathan* beside them.

Somehow, the airship was not aflame.

“The engine?” Alek asked Klopp.

The man sniffed the air and shook his head. “All the elektricals are cooked, and the starboard side is silent as well.”

Alek turned to Hirst and said, “We’ve lost the engines. Perhaps you could put that gun away.”

The chief engineer stared at the air pistol in his hand, then slipped it into his pocket and pulled out a whistle. “I’ll call a surgeon for you. Tell your mutinous friend to set you down.”

“My ‘mutinous friend’ just saved your—,” Alek started, but a fresh wave of dizziness passed over him. “Let me sit,” he muttered to Klopp. “He says he can get a doctor up here.”

“But he’s the one who shot you!”

“Yes, but he was aiming at you. Now please put me down.”

With an unkindly look at Hirst, Klopp leaned Alek gently against the controls. As Alek caught his breath, he glanced up at the airship’s flank. The cilia were still rippling like windblown grass. Even without the engines to motivate it, the great beast was still headed away from the ironclads.

Alek looked sternward through the motionless propeller. The ironclads were steaming away.

“That’s odd,” he said. “They don’t seem to want to finish us off.”

Klopp nodded. “They’ve gone back to their north-northeast heading. They must be expecting us somewhere.”

“North-northeast,” Alek repeated. He knew that was significant somehow. He also knew that he should be worried that the *Leviathan* was now drifting southward, away from Constantinople.

But breathing was worry enough.

Deryn stood up slowly, blinking away spots from her eyes.

A barking lightning bolt! That was what had fizzled up from the Clanker warship and leapt across the sky, dancing on every squick of metal on the *Leviathan's* topside. The Huxley winch had thrown out a blinding flock of white sparks, knocking her half silly in the process.

Deryn looked in all directions, terrified that she would see fires bursting willy-nilly from the membrane. But it was all dark except for the jaggy shimmers burned into her vision. The sniffers must have done their jobs brilliantly before the battle. Not a squick of hydrogen had been leaking from the skin.

Then she remembered—the *Leviathan* had spun around just in time, the whole airship twisting like a dog chasing its own tail.

Hydrogen ...

She looked up into the dark sky, and her jaw dropped.

There was Newkirk, his arms waving madly, the Huxley blazing over his head like a giant Christmas pudding soaked with brandy.

Deryn felt sick, the way she had in a hundred nightmares replaying Da's accident, so close to the awful sight above her. The Huxley tugged at its cable, carried higher by the heat of the flames spinning the winch's crank.

But a moment later, its hydrogen expended, the airbeast began to drop.

Newkirk was twisting in the pilot's rig, still alive somehow. Then Deryn saw a misting in the starlight around the Huxley. Newkirk had spilled the water ballast to keep himself from burning. Clever boy.

The dead husk of the airbeast billowed out like a ragged parachute, but it was still falling fast.

The Huxley was a thousand feet up, and if it missed crashing against the *Leviathan's* topsides, it would drop another thousand feet before the cable snapped it to a halt. Best to make that trip as short as possible. Deryn reached for the winch—but her hand froze.

Did electricity linger?

“*Dummkopf!*” she cursed herself, forcing herself to grasp the metal.

No sparks shot from it, and she began to turn as fast as she could. But the Huxley was coming down faster than she could reel it in. The cable began to coil across the airship's spine, tangling in the feet of crewmen and sniffers running past.

Still spinning the crank wildly, Deryn looked up. Newkirk was hanging limply beneath the burned husk, which was drifting away from the *Leviathan*.

The engines had stopped, and the searchlights had gone dead too. The crewmen were using electric torches to call the bats and strafing hawks back from the black sky—the Clanker lightning contraption had knocked everything out.

But if the airship was powerless, why was the wind pushing Newkirk away? Shouldn't they all have been drifting together?

Deryn looked down at the flank, her eyes widening.

The cilia were still moving, still carrying the airship away from danger.

“Now, that's barking odd,” she muttered.

Usually a hydrogen breather without engines was content to drift. Of course, the airbeast *had* been acting strangely since the crash in the Alps. All the old crewmen said that the crash in the Alps—

the Clanker engines—had rattled its attic.

But this was no time to ponder. Newkirk was gliding past only a hundred feet away, close enough that Deryn could see his blackened face and soaking uniform. But he didn't seem to be moving.

"Newkirk!" she yelled, her hand raw on the winch's handle. But he fell past without answering.

The coils of slack cable began to rustle, like a nest of snakes strewn across the topside. The Huxley was dragging its cable behind as it dropped below the airship.

"Clear those lines!" Deryn shouted, waving off a crewman standing among the slithering coils. The man danced away, the cable snapping at his ankles, trying to drag him down as well.

She went at the crank again, till the line snapped tight with a sickening jerk. Deryn hit the brake and checked the cable markings—just over five hundred feet.

The *Leviathan* was two hundred feet from top to bottom, so Newkirk would be dangling less than three hundred feet below. Strapped into the pilot's rig, he was probably all right. Unless the fire had got him, or he'd been jolted to a neck-breaking stop ...

Deryn took a deep breath, trying to stop her hands from shaking.

She couldn't crank him back up. The winch was designed for a hydrogen-filled Huxley, not to handle dead weight.

Deryn followed the taut cable, climbing down the ratlines on the airbeast's flank. From the ship's waist she could just see the Huxley's dark shape fluttering against the whitecaps of the waves.

"Barking spiders," she murmured. The water was much closer than she'd expected.

The *Leviathan* was losing altitude.

Of course—the great airbeast was trying to find the strongest wind to pull itself away from the German ironclads. It wouldn't care about smacking poor burnt Newkirk against the ocean's choppy surface.

But the officers could drop ballast, and drag the ship up against its will. Deryn pulled out her command whistle and blew for a message lizard, then stared again at the Huxley below.

There was no human movement that she could see. Newkirk had to be stunned, at least. And he wouldn't have the right equipment to climb the cable. No one expected to climb *up* from an ascender.

Where was that barking message lizard? She saw one scrambling across the membrane, and whistled for it. But the lizard just stared at her and jabbered something about an electric malfunction.

"Brilliant," she murmured. The bolt of Clanker lightning had scrambled the wee beasties' brains. Down below, the dark water looked closer every second.

She was going to have to rescue Newkirk herself.

Deryn searched the pockets of her flight suit. In airmanship class Mr. Rigby had taught them about how riggers "belayed," which was Service-speak for sliding down a rope without breaking your neck. She found a few carabiners and enough line to make a pair of friction hitches.

After attaching her safety clip to the Huxley's cable, Deryn twisted the carabiner tight. She couldn't wind the rope around her hips because the weight of the dead Huxley would snip her in half. But after a moment's fiddling, she attached the extra carabiners to her harness and strung the cable through them.

Mr. Rigby wouldn't approve of this method, Deryn thought as she kicked herself away from the membrane.

She slid down in short jerks, the carabiners' friction keeping her from falling too fast. But the rope was hot beneath her gloves, its fibers fraying wherever she snapped to a halt. Deryn doubted this cable was designed to hold the weight of a dead Huxley and two middies.

The ocean thundered below Deryn, the wind growing colder now that the sun had fully set. The peak of a tall wave smacked against the Huxley's drooping membrane, cracking like a gunshot.

“Newkirk!” Deryn shouted, and the boy stirred in his pilot’s rig.

A shudder of relief went through her—he was alive. Not like Da.

She let herself fall the last twenty yards, the rope hissing like mad and spilling a burnt smell in the salt air. But her boots landed softly on the squishy membrane of the dead airbeast, which smelled of smoke and salt, like jellyfish cooked on a hearth fire.

“Where in blazes am I?” Newkirk mumbled, barely audible over the rumble of the waves. His hair was scorched, his face and hands blackened with smoke.

“Almost in the barking ocean, that’s where! Can you move?”

The boy stared at his blackened hands, wriggling his fingers, then unstrapped himself from the harness. He stood up shakily on the frame of the pilot’s rig.

“Aye. I’m just singed.” He ran his fingers through his hair, or what was left of it.

“Can you climb?” Deryn asked.

Newkirk stared up at the *Leviathan*’s dark belly. “Aye, but that’s *miles* away! Couldn’t you have cranked faster?”

“You could have *fallen slower!*” Deryn shouted back. She unclipped two carabiners and shoved them into his hands, along with a short length of line. “Tie yourself a friction hitch. Or don’t you remember Mr. Rigby’s classes?”

Newkirk stared at the carabiners, then up at the distant airship.

“Aye, I remember. But I never thought we’d be ascending that far.”

“Ascending,” of course, was Service-Speak for climbing *up* a rope without breaking your neck. Deryn’s fingers worked fast with her own line. A friction hitch slid freely up a rope, but held fast when weight was hanging from it. That way, she and Newkirk could stop and rest without relying on their muscles to keep them from sliding back.

“You go first,” she ordered. If Newkirk slid down, she could stop him.

He pulled himself up a few feet, then tested his hitch, swinging freely from the rope. “It works!”

“Aye. You’ll be conquering Mount Everest next!” As she spoke, another wave slapped at the Huxley, splashing across them both. Deryn lost her footing, but her friction hitch held.

She spat out salt water and yelled, “Get going, you *Dummkopf!* The ship’s losing altitude!”

Newkirk started climbing, scrambling with feet and hands. He had soon cleared enough distance that Deryn could haul herself off the dead Huxley.

Another wave hit the airbeast, snapping the line tight, and Newkirk skidded down till he was almost on top of her. If the *Leviathan* dropped any lower, the beastie’s carcass would be dragging in the water. If the membrane filled up, it would pull on the rope like a barrel full of stones.

Enough to break any cable ... She had to cut the Huxley loose.

“Higher!” she yelled, and started climbing madly.

About twenty feet above the Huxley, Deryn halted, hanging just above a badly frayed spot. She pulled out her rigging knife, reached down, and started hacking at the line. Huxley cable was barking thick, but when the next tall wave struck the airbeast, the fibers unraveled in a blur and snapped.

Without the beastie’s dead weight anchoring them, suddenly they were swinging across the black sea, cast about by the wind. Newkirk cried out with surprise overhead.

“Sorry!” Deryn yelled up. “Should have warned you.”

But with the Huxley’s weight gone, the rope wouldn’t snap ... probably.

She started climbing again, wishing for the hundredth time that she had the arm strength of a booby. But soon the waves no longer threatened her dangling boots.

Halfway up, Deryn took a long breather, searching the dark horizon for the two German ironclads. They were nowhere to be seen.

Maybe the Royal Navy was close by, and had kept the ships running. But Deryn couldn’t see any

sign of surface ships. The only shape on the water was the Huxley's carcass, a lonely black smear on the waves.

"Poor beastie," she said, shivering. The whole airship and its crew might have wound up like that—burnt black, as lonely as driftwood on the dark sea. If the hydrogen sniffers had missed a single leak or if the airbeast hadn't spun itself around just in time, they'd all have been done for.

"Barking Clankers," Deryn murmured. "Making their own *lightning* now."

She closed her eyes to shut her dark memories away, the roar of skin-prickling heat and the smell of burnt flesh. This time she'd won. The fire hadn't taken anyone she loved.

Deryn shuddered once more, then started to climb again.

“This is entirely unacceptable!” Dr. Barlow cried.

“I’m s-sorry, ma’am,” the guard sputtered. “But the captain said the Clanker boy wasn’t to have visitors.”

Deryn shook her head—the man’s resistance was already faltering. He was backed up against Alek’s stateroom door, sweat breaking out on his forehead.

“I am not a visitor, you imbecile,” Dr. Barlow said. “I’m a doctor here to see an injured patient!”

Tazza’s ears perked up at the lady boffin’s sharp tone, and he let out a low growl. Deryn held his leash a squick tighter. “Shush now, Tazza. No biting.”

“But the surgeon was already here,” the guard squeaked, staring wide eyed at the thylacine. “Saw the boy only bruised a rib.”

“On top of suffering from shock, no doubt,” Dr. Barlow said. “Or did you fail to notice our recent encounter with a prodigious amount of electricity?”

“Of course not, ma’am.” The guard swallowed, still eyeing Tazza nervously. “But the captain was quite specific—”

“Did he *specifically* forbid doctors from seeing the patient?”

“Er, no.”

Just give up, thought Deryn. It didn’t matter that Dr. Barlow was a boffin—a fabricator of beasties—and not a pulse-taking stick-out-your-tongue doctor. She’d be seeing this particular patient one way or another.

Deryn hoped that Alek really was all right. The Clanker lightning had danced across the whole ship, but it must have been worst in the engine pods, with all that metal about ... Well, second to worst anyway. Newkirk’s hair was half burnt off, and he had a knot on his head the size of a cricket ball.

But how had Alek bruised a rib? That didn’t sound like something an electric shock would do.

Finally the guard surrendered his post, slinking off to check with the watch officer and trusting Dr. Barlow to wait till he got back. She didn’t, of course, just pushed the door straight open.

Alek lay in bed, his ribs wrapped in bandages. His skin was ashen, his dark green eyes glistening in the dawn light streaming through the portholes.

“Barking spiders!” Deryn said. “You’re as pale as a mealyworm.”

A wan smile spread across the boy’s face. “It’s good to see you, too, Dylan. And you, Dr. Barlow.”

“Good morning, Alek,” the lady boffin said. “You *are* pale, aren’t you? As if you’ve lost some blood. An odd symptom for electrocution.”

Alek grimaced as he struggled to sit up higher. “I’m afraid you’re right, ma’am. Mr. Hirst shot me.”

“Shot you?” Deryn cried.

Alek nodded. “Luckily it was one of your feeble compressed air guns. Dr. Busk said the bullet hit my rib and bounced off, but nothing’s broken, thanks partly to my fencing armor. I should be walking about soon enough.”

Deryn stared at the bandages. “But what in blazes did he shoot you *for*?”

“He was aiming for Klopp. They had a ... disagreement. Klopp realized what was about to happen with the Tesla cannon—and decided to turn us around.”

“A Tesla cannon?” Dr. Barlow repeated. “As in that awful Mr. Tesla?”

“That’s what Klopp says,” Alek said.

“But you Clankers didn’t turn us around,” Deryn said. “Everyone says that the beastie itself turned

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