



Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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IN THE AGE OF IRON AND ASHES

by Aliette de Bodard

They ran the girl down, in the grey light of dawn: a ring of copper-mailed horsemen, racing after her until her exhaustion finally felled her.

Yudhyana sat on his horse, shivering in the cold morning air, and thought of home—of the narrow, spice-filled streets of Rasamuri, and of his daughters shrieking with delight as he raced them in the courtyard. Anything to prevent him from focusing on what was happening.

Afterwards, they tied the girl's unconscious body to the saddle of a white mare. Pakshman, Yudhyana's second-in-command, nodded at him, waiting for orders.

“Back to the city,” Yudhyana said. His gaze was on the plains, sloping down to the river Kuni—and the cloud of dust that marked the advance of the Sharwah army. He said, “She didn't have time to reach them.”

Pakshman's face was grim. “No,” he said. “The city is still safe.”

Yudhyana thought of a thousand thousand chariots, of gold-harnessed elephants, of a myriad archers, all waiting to

topple Rasamuri's walls. Yes, he thought. Safe. But for how long?

* * *

In the evening the girl woke up, shivering. Yudhyana let Pakshman and his men tie her to a stake in the ground, his mind desperately seeking a way to avoid her, to avoid thinking about the war and what it had made of him.

We must make the necessary sacrifices, Priest Marna had said, but Yudhyana knew himself to be weak—knew himself to be suited only for an age of peace, and not for the red-hot fury of war.

The growing darkness gradually robbed the stunted trees of their color and of their shape, until everything was subsumed under the mantle of night. The men's fire sank to embers, and the raucous noise of their banter faded. Yudhyana walked in the darkness, and found his steps, almost in spite of himself, leading him to the girl.

He nodded, briefly, to the soldier who was keeping guard, and came to stand over her. In the darkness, her eyes were wide: those of a trapped animal.

"You had to know you wouldn't reach the Sharwabs," he said, finally.

"I tried, didn't I?" the girl said.

Yudhyana shook his head. “Do you know how the Sharwahs treat their women? If they hadn’t tortured you as a traitor, they would have shut you in a harem—branded you like cattle and treated you—” He paused, then, remembering that she was a slave.

She laughed a bitter laugh, in the darkness. “No better than I was treated in Rasamuri,” she said. “Why should I owe you loyalty?”

Yudhyana made a short, stabbing gesture in the darkness—longing for the Destroyer to walk the earth, and set right the injustices he was powerless against. “They’ll kill you for what you’ve done. They have to set an example.”

In the darkness, he couldn’t see her expression, but he thought she was smiling: a thing utterly leeched of joy. “Yes,” she said. “But I have something they want.”

“You?” She was a slave, brought from the islands as a child, like so many servants of the temple. He could not see what they would want of her.

But, even as he thought that, another part of him thought of Priest Marna’s rage when he’d learnt of her flight; of his insistence that Yudhyana’s whole company go after her. “Even if that’s true,” he said, “they’ll still kill you.”

“What should it matter to you?” Her voice was low, as cutting as the sacrificial knife.

“I—” He stared at the moon above: the eye of the gods on this world, the eternal reminder of their protection. He wished it would give him an answer. “I don’t know.”

“I see. But to me, it doesn’t matter.”

“You value your own life so little?”

The girl did not answer for a while; for so long, in fact, that he had started to move back towards the camp. When she spoke, her voice stopped him, as surely as a knife drawn across his throat. “Everything lives and dies,” she whispered. “Everything changes, and all changes end in death.”

The first lines of the Book of the Destroyer, given by Him to mankind, an eternity ago. Yudhyana, thinking of the coming army—the god’s ultimate jest—shook his head, and went on walking into the darkness. “No,” he said. “That’s not true.”

But, deep down, he knew his words to be a lie.

* * *

They reached Rasamuri on the second morning of their journey. The tall sandstone walls towered over them, carved with the likeness of the gods: the Creator’s hands, parting the primordial sea to make the very first forests; the Protector in His incarnation as a woman, fighting the King of Demons at the foot of Mount Seilesa; the Destroyer atop a high cliff, preaching to the multitudes.

The girl was imprisoned in a small cell below the fortress;

and Yudhyana walked alone into the temple, to present his report to Priest Marna.

Inside, acolytes were brushing the androgynous statue of the Destroyer with clarified butter; the combined smells of rancid fat and stale incense made Yudhyana's head spin.

Priest Marna was waiting for him behind the altar, looking more wan and tired than Yudhyana had ever seen him. The yellow thread of his office, crossing his chest at the level of his heart, seemed in the dim light the same sallow shade as his skin. "Yudhyana," he said. "What news?"

Yudhyana shrugged. Marna had taken a liking to him, for reasons that were a puzzle: Yudhyana himself had never shown any particular love for the priestly caste. "The girl is in the cells," he said. And, because everything about Marna currently grated on his nerves: "The army wasn't far behind us."

"How long?"

"Two days, at most. I don't suppose the rajah—"

Marna shook his head. "You forget," he said, softly. "We are *varam*, the favored of the gods. Rajah Irjun wouldn't yield, even if he had the assurance everyone would survive."

Of course. We are proud people, Yudhyana thought—and, for no reason at all, he remembered the girl's bitter smile as she looked upon him. The menial work, we leave to our slaves.

"What do you want with her?" he asked.

Marna's face did not move. "She was a runaway slave. I can't allow discipline to lapse, especially now."

Yudhyana shook his head—and asked, with an audacity he had not known he possessed, "You wouldn't send an entire company to run after a mere slave."

"Wouldn't I?" Marna's face was a mask.

Once, Yudhyana would have nodded and withdrawn; but now the invaders were almost at their gates, and there was no return. He stood his ground, and said nothing.

Finally, Marna relented. "We will make... a gesture," he said. "Something to show the Sharwah that we aren't weak, and that to take us will cost them dearly."

"I don't see what the girl has to do with that."

"Chandni-em-Pankhala," Marna corrected, absent-mindedly. "Descended from Ilya, who founded the order of the Destroyer, centuries ago."

"But she's a slave?" Yudhyana said, shocked.

"Fortunes rise and fall." Marna's face was bleakly amused. It was not clear to whom he referred, whether to the girl or to Rasamuri. "But blood—blood never lies. In her veins are the powers of her ancestor."

A bitter laugh escaped Yudhyana's lips. "Magic? What do you expect? That she will kill soldiers with her gaze?"

"With her dance," Marna said, and his voice was utterly

serious. “The Blessed Ilya once dispatched an entire army, it is said.”

An army of renegade priests, Yudhyana thought, bleakly amused at what Marna wasn’t telling him. “She’s a girl. A slave who’s frightened at the thought of death. And you tell me stories?”

Marna said nothing for a while. “If it doesn’t work,” he said, “then we will still have shown them how true *varam* die.”

With pride, Yudhyana thought. With our accursed pride.

* * *

Yudhyana went home, not knowing what else he could do. He found his wife Apura in the women’s quarters, supervising the servants’ weaving.

She turned, surprised, when the sound of his boots on stone echoed under the vast marble ceilings. “I wasn’t expecting you so soon.”

He smiled. “It was an easy mission.” He went to her and enfolded her in a sandalwood-scented embrace—trying not to think of the girl’s slight, shivering form in the moonlight. “But I missed you and the girls.”

“They are with their tutors,” Apura said. She looked at him for a while. Her eyes, highlighted with kohl, appeared even larger in the sunlight. “You saw them coming?”

“The Sharwah?” He hesitated over whether to lie to her. But he couldn’t. It wasn’t that kind of marriage; never had been. “They’re not far behind.”

“Not much time left.” Apura’s face had grown distant, as expressionless as cut stone.

“We could flee,” Yudhyana said, feeling ashamed of the thought as soon as he had uttered it. But at least it would keep them alive.

Apura shook her head. “Even if we did wish that, it’s too late.” She pulled herself away from him. From behind her came the rhythmic clacking of the looms, and the soft, swishing sound of cloth spilling from the frame to pile on the floor. “The other cities have fallen.”

Yudhyana said nothing. He wished he had been born in another time, in another place—where people would blossom in peacetime, would delight in each other’s presence. Not in this one; not in this doomed city waiting for its conqueror to take it apart, stone by stone.

Apura must have guessed his thoughts. “Come,” she said. “The children will want to see you.”

But even little Rana’s shrieks of delight weren’t enough to put the image of the girl out of his mind. A dance, Marna had said. On the very first night of the siege, she’ll dance on the battlements, to show them we are not afraid.

She'll die. In the white shift of dancers, with gold glinting on her arms and on her throat, with the glow of torches highlighting the least of her movements, the girl—Chandni—wouldn't last long enough to fulfill whatever dreams Marna had. The enemy would kill her long before her dance was over. And if they did not... then what kind of life could she look forward to, regardless of whether Marna was right?

Late at night, as the moon swung over Rasamuri—and as the ponderous thud of elephants on the march started to make the city walls shake—Yudhyana found himself awake, and unable to sleep.

He got up, and went into the prisons of the fortress.

The girl was in a cell. Two thin chains of silver ran from her ankles to holes in the wall; a necklace of leather encircled her throat, with another heavier chain to prevent her escape.

As if it would change anything, Yudhyana thought, bitterly. Children's tales. There was no magic, nothing that would change their fate. Even as he embraced Rana and Sawani, he knew that they would die—and that he would, too, cut down in the first rush of the invaders. He was a man of peace, not a warrior; and the girl was just a slave, not the terrible magician Marna imagined her to be.

The guard opened the door for him. The sound of the hinges scraping against the sandstone woke the girl up; she

stared at him, her eyes wide in the torchlight.

“Come to taunt me?” she asked.

Behind Yudhyana, the guard closed the gate, leaving them both in darkness, as in their first meeting. “No,” Yudhyana said. “I came to talk with you.”

Her lips compressed to a sliver of flesh. “I think we’ve already said everything we need to say.”

Yudhyana crouched by her—away from her legs, if the desire to strike him ever came into her mind. “Do you know why they’re keeping you alive?”

She laughed, bitterly. “The High Priest has already been here. For the dance, of course.”

“That was what you knew?” he asked. Perhaps Marna was right, and there could still be a miracle. But, no; even if she could dance, even if she could make armies topple, she would strike at Rasamuri first. And he couldn’t blame her. What in creation had Marna been thinking of?

“What he *thinks* I know,” Chandni corrected. “He is mistaken. There is no dance. There are no miracles. That was in some other age of the world, when the gods still walked the earth.” She stretched, in a tinkle of metal. “My family was killed. My sister and I were enslaved, and she died of bearing her master’s child. How can you believe Ilya’s line has any power?”

“I don’t,” Yudhyana said, truthfully. “But I’m not making the decisions.”

“No,” Chandni said. She looked at him, as if for the first time. “You’re not one of them.”

“I was born in Rasamuri,” Yudhyana said. “When the army was still keeping the order within our walls.”

“A long time ago, then,” Chandni said. “You’re not a very good soldier.”

He started. “What makes you think that?”

She smiled. “The whole time they hunted me, your mind was elsewhere.” She must have seen his shocked face, for she added, “The line of Ilya has watered down, but some things remain. A shadow of what once was.”

“Then there is magic.”

She shook her head. “Not the kind you want. That was lost when the Destroyer left this world. I don’t think it will ever return.”

“Then you’ll die for nothing,” he said, more vehemently than he had meant to.

Her smile in the darkness was terrible: not the Destroyer as prophet, but as the beast that would trample the world under its feet. “Does anyone ever die for something? You’re a good man, not meant for those times.”

“Do we ever choose where we are born?” he asked her.

She said nothing for a while. “Where we are reborn, perhaps. But we all make the best we can with what we have around us. I’m sorry for you.”

“I—” he began. No one had ever seen that, had ever dissected his weakness with such precision.

She smiled again. “You mean well, but there’s nothing you can do for me. You’d better leave, Yudhyana. Your family will be waiting for you.”

It was only after he had left her cell that he realized she had called him by his name, but that he had never given it to her.

* * *

On the following morning, the Sharwah army arrived, with the flame emblem of the true god floating over the silk tents, and the rumble of a thousand elephants shaking the walls of the fortress.

Yudhyana stood on the highest wall of Rasamuri, with Apura at his side, and watched horsemen wheel between the tents, shooting arrows at targets with the grace of those born in the saddle.

Apura was silent, cradling Sawani in her arms. “Now I know there’s only one way out.”

He didn’t say anything. There were no words that would have added anything; nothing that could diminish the truth.

They could have run away, like Chandni, but where would they have found refuge? The nearest city was months away, and the army lay between them and the fertile delta. They both knew that the only way was to survive the siege; and they both knew it would be impossible.

In the evening, Marna staged his performance. A covered awning hosted the rajah and his wives, and the members of his court shared other smaller constructions: like a reflection of the tents below, Yudhyana thought, wryly.

He stood by the side of the battlements once again—save that this time there was a stage, erected where everyone could see it—and dancers milling on the wooden trestles, even as the musicians tuned the strings of their veenas.

He could not see Chandni, though he had no doubt she would be there, somewhere. Sacrificed for the sake of a children's tale, and for Marna's pride.

For our pride, he thought. On the stage, Marna was singing the first hymns to the Destroyer, his booming voice melding with the sweet tones of the flutes, drums marking the end of each verse, and the grave tones of the veena mingling with the song that was sung.

“Today, we honor the Destroyer, who makes and unmakes all things,” Marna said—and withdrew, leaving Chandni alone on stage. In the dim light, Yudhyana could barely see the

chains—but they were still there, thin slivers of light that ran from her wrists into the ground. They clinked as she moved, slowly at first, swaying to the rhythm of the music—and then faster and faster, a staccato punctuating the beats of her dance.

Music rose from the strings of the veena: a soft, plaintive sound that melded with her steps—and she was dancing, leaping upwards like a bird straining to take flight, her arms and legs weaving a pattern that did not belong in this world, dark and terrible and unspeakable.

Marna was smiling. But Yudhyana, standing on the edge of the crowd, saw only the chains holding Chandni fast, and the way they cut each of her leaps short—and in her dance he saw not freedom, not miracles, but the desperation of caged things unable to free themselves, unable to be master of their own destinies.

This wasn't the age of magic but the age of slaves, and follies, and overweening pride.

His hands clenched into fists, and his eyes ached. Unconsciously, he found himself moving, pushing his way through the massed crowd. There had to be a way—any way—something he could tell Marna, to make this mockery stop....

A flash of light arced from the waiting Sharwah army to the battlements—hanging suspended in the air for a short,

terrible moment. As Yudhyana opened his mouth to scream, it found its target.

Chandni gasped, her hands pulling at the arrow embedded in her chest. A second one was already arching its way—this time shining with incandescent fire—and falling on the canopy of the rajah's tent. The fragile silk, catching it, blazed like a funeral pyre.

Then everything was confusion. A mass of people bore down on Yudhyana, all seeking to escape. He stubbornly went on fighting his way towards the stage and the dying dancer—even as screams echoed all around him, and the crackle of the fire rose and rose as if to engulf them all.

Somehow, he made his way to the stage. He was the only one by then; the platform had emptied. Only the rajah's tent remained, consuming itself in flames. Marna was at the back, screaming for some order that never got imposed; and Yudhyana was alone, kneeling by the body of the dying girl.

“Chandni,” he whispered. He cradled her against him: an instinctive gesture.

She stared upwards, at the moon that spread its light across the sky, bathing her sweat-covered skin in a white sheen, like milk. She was shivering, and she did not speak for a while.

She smiled at him, through the spreading smoke. “It’s never over, Yudhyana. Don’t you see?”

And then her eyes closed; her breathing quickened, and she did not speak again.

He held her in his arms, heedless of the confusion, of the fire; of the arrows that could have been shot at both of them. He held her, feeling the feverish warmth of her skin on his—until nothing was left.

* * *

They laid her body in the vault, along with that of the men and women who had died, trampled by the mob. In the city, confusion had followed the burning of the rajah’s tent: Rajah Irjun himself had been badly scarred by the flames, and had withdrawn into his chambers. No one but his closest attendants had seen him or talked to him since the debacle. Marna was still trying to impose order, but everything had spun out of control.

Yudhyana went home in silence, remembering the touch of Chandni’s body on his—and the heady smell of incense and sandalwood, rising to cover that of blood and urine.

His house was a mirror of the confusion within the city: servants roamed the corridors, aimlessly—but in the nursery, Apura, always a bulwark of pragmatism, was singing his

daughters to sleep. Dark circles underlined her eyes, to match the black kohl on her eyelids.

He waited, silently, until she was done. “The walls still hold.”

“For how long?” Apura’s voice was bitter.

“I don’t know,” he said, and it was the truth. He expected to be called forth, at any moment: to be told that the army was entering the city, and his heart contracted at the thought.

Apura watched him, silently. “The rajah has lost control,” she said. “It’s almost the end.”

There was nothing he could answer. He came closer to her, ran his hand down her neck. Her skin was warm, pulsing with her heartbeat—and for a while he felt nothing but that warmth spreading to his hand, to his arm, to his own heart. “I’m sorry,” he said.

Apura disentangled herself from him, gently. “It’s nothing you did, Yudhyana.”

He thought of Chandni, lying still in the vault of the Destroyer’s temple. No. It was what he hadn’t done. His hand strayed to his sword at his side, clenched the cold metal hilt.

“I’ll get some sleep,” he said.

“Yes,” Apura said. “They’ll call you, soon.”

In his room, he lay on his bed, staring at the marble ceiling inlaid with malachite and cornaline and precious stones of all

colors. It shone, like the glistening light of the moon overhead—and the light was the same he had seen in Chandni's eyes, before death extinguished it forever.

He fell asleep, finally, dreaming of fire—and of Chandni's dance, which wasn't the spell Marna had dreamt of, but simply the desperation of a helpless prisoner, underlying every gesture, every clink of the bells.

In the darkness, he heard the bells again: one two one two, on and on and on until they melded with the rhythm of his heart. The ground was thrumming with the charge of elephants, and Chandni stood, waiting for him, at the top of the ridge.

"You're dead," he whispered.

She did not move. Her face was turned away from him. "Yes," she said. Her voice, too, was deeper than it should have been. "But isn't death the beginning of rebirth?"

"No," he said, thinking of Rasamuri, and of the walls that held nothing, that supported nothing. "It's the end, Chandni. There's nothing beyond."

"Ssh," she said. She turned at last; and he saw that she was wearing the attire of a sacred dancer, the same clothes she had died in. Her feet were already moving, and the sound of the veena hung in the air, hovering on the edge of becoming.

"This is—" This is a dream, he wanted to say. An illusion.

I'll wake up and lie in my bed, by my useless sword that I wasn't meant to take up.... But the words couldn't pass his lips.

"This is the end of the dance," Chandni whispered, and, her back arched, launched into the figures she had been going through, before the arrow came out of the darkness and struck her down.

The ground shook, under his feet, as if the thousand Sharwah elephants accompanied her dance. The sky overhead was dark, quivering with the promise of rain, and still she danced: no longer a slave but a woman warrior, her chained hands holding spears, her feet parting the earth.

Chandni, he wanted to say. Stop. But he couldn't. He couldn't speak.

He thought, too, that he could not move, but he found that his feet were answering her; and, as the drums joined the invisible veena, he was with her, slipping into the invisible gap she wove for him.

This is the dance, she whispered. This is the memory of what Ilya left us—the dance that ends the world, so that something else might be built on our ashes. So that we might be reborn.

But—

It's not powerful enough. Remember? Her laughter was silver; and the sound of thunder over the plains. But it's

enough, Yudhyana. It's enough for a small gift.

And, as she danced, her shape flickered; and she was no longer a woman, but something huge and unspeakable, the vastness between worlds, the nightmares that stalked the void. She was the beginning of everything; and the end of everything; and the spears in her hands were deep in the ground, and they were the only thing that held the earth together.

This wasn't the age of magic, or of miracles. This was the age of overweening pride. This was the age of war, of iron and ashes.

He saw the city, then, flickering between her outstretched hands; he saw himself, running with Apura behind him, a child in his arms and one on his back; and he saw the soldiers that caught him; the spears that slit Sawani's throat; the sword that scattered Rana's brains; Apura, writhing beneath the men that held her pinned to the ground, screaming in such pain that he could not endure it anymore, such pain that what they were doing to him faded into nothingness....

No, he whispered, no.

But Chandni was still dancing, and her dance was the inexorable steps of the siege towers; the veena the thunder of arrows; and Apura was still screaming, and both his daughters were dead, and he....

He awoke, with a start, in his darkened room. The memory

of the dance still lay in his mind; and the rumble was still there, too; and he knew what it was, even before hearing the cries.

The walls were breached.

His sword lay by his side, shining in the darkness; and in his mind was the memory of Chandni's voice. Everything that lives must change, and all changes end in death.

And death is rebirth.

Gently, carefully, his hand closed around the hilt of his sword. He rose, and walked into the nursery. Apura was sleeping with Sawani in her arms; and Rana was in her cradle.

He knelt, gently, by their side. "I'm sorry," he said, as he had said earlier—knowing that the words were hollow, utterly devoid of meaning.

He held Apura's face in his hands, feeling warmth spread to his fingers, a reminder of what could have been. His mind was a blank, still filled with the dance that had ended everything; and his hand did not shake.

Better death, sometimes.

Blood fountained from her open throat, smearing his blade, staining his hands. He forced himself to think of the dream, of the memory of the army rumbling on towards them; and of the walls, torn open as easily as children's toys.

He turned, in silence, to his daughters, and did what had to be done.

Afterwards, he walked outside in the gathering darkness—towards the distant sound of battles, where the last of Rasamuri's defenders were fighting for something that had been doomed from the start.

He held his sword in his hand, and the weight of his Armour pressed down on him. The light of the moon was cold on his face, on his exposed neck. And in his mind, Chandni was still dancing, to the screams of the dying and the sound of metal on metal, to the smell of smoke; to the smell of ashes spread over an earth that had to be destroyed and cleansed in order to bear seeds.

And he knew that in some indefinable, inconceivable way, he would be there when that earth bloomed again. He knew that some part of him would walk among the new flowers and the glimmering trees with Apura and Sawani and Rana—in an age of peace, an age of sunlight, an age of soft breezes and restful dreams, the age he had been made for.

For nothing ever truly ended.

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day job as a computer engineer. In her spare time, she writes speculative fiction: her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Realms of Fantasy and Asimov's, and she is the author of "Beneath the Mask" in BCS #8 and "Blighted Heart" in BCS #22 and BCS Audio Fiction Podcast #20. She has been a Writers of the Future winner and a Campbell Award finalist. Her first novel, Servant of the Underworld, will be released by Angry Robot/Harper Collins in January 2010. Visit <http://www.aliettedebodard.com> for more information.

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ON THE TRANSMONTANE RUN WITH THE AERIAL MAIL EXPRESS

by B. Gordon

Valves hissed, and Willow saw the blimp's gasbag swell to a monstrous black egg outlined by pink dawn sky. The ground-crew shouted and braced themselves against the guyropes. Willow's stomach grumbled; she'd been too nervous to choke down breakfast. Cookie had ruffled her hair and rolled up a napkin of dried fruit and jerky. It made a comforting lump in her pocket.

Pounding feet announced her pals come to see off her first mail-run. She turned to meet their grinning faces, shadowed under the peaked caps of the Aerial Mail Express.

"Mind the flyin' squids don't eat you!" Veda said.

Mick shook his head. "Nah, don't worry 'bout that. The pirates'll gut you 'fore you get high enough for squids."

"I don't believe in flying squids," Willow said. "Nobody's caught one, even seen one close to."

Veda waved her arms like tentacles. "That proves it. Nobody sees them and lives."

"More likely the losses are due to inclement weather." Flight-Instructor Danilewsky stepped out of the hangar. "I see

you need reminding of the risks of atmospheric pressure and temperature change. Expect a test this afternoon.”

Mick groaned, and Willow bit down a grin.

“Willow, where’s your—simian companion?” Danilewsky leaned over her. “I hope you appreciate how generous the governors are to permit such an irregular crew.”

Not that generous, Willow thought. Giff and Susie, her two chimpanzees, drew no pay though they worked as hard as the cadets. Giff wasn’t any too happy about leaving Susie behind, but the governors reckoned themselves taking a mighty chance letting even one ape on their precious airships. Willow had finger-signed the order—GIFF COME SUSIE STAY—to both chimps for days until she got sulky agreements. “Giff’s with the aft ground-crew, sir. He’ll run up the rope soon’s the blimp’s released. We’ve practiced.”

“Hmph.” Danilewsky disapproved of circus tricks. “Your first solo is easy, a milk-run. You should have no difficulty with a minor additional task.”

“Yessir.” Should she have said ‘no sir’?

Danilewsky wasn’t listening, either way. “The hydrogen generating plant in the swamp. You know where it is?”

“Yessir.” This time she was pretty sure it should be ‘yes’.
“Coordinates H.3.c, sir.”

“It’s been sabotaged. Repeated tampering that substantially delays refueling. There’s prize money if you discover the cause. You will remain at the plant a few hours—no more than a half-day—and observe. Preferably from concealment.”

Willow didn’t ask how she’d conceal a 104-foot blimp. “I’ll do my best, sir.”

Danilewsky strode off to the stern of the airship, probably to treat the ground-crew to a lecture. Susie’s hunched silhouette swung from behind the red-brick dormitory. Willow beckoned to keep her away from Giff. Chimps didn’t understand good-byes.

“Now we know,” Mick said. “Not pirates, not squids. It’s swampies that’ll get our poor friend Willow.” He held his navy-blue cap over his narrow chest. “It was good knowin’ you, Will. Can I have your overcoat if you don’t come back?”

“Trade for your cap!” Darting forward, Willow snatched his cap and tossed it. Susie’s long hairy arm plucked it from the air. She loped under the grey shadow of the blimp, dodging dangling ropes and clusters of men. Willow ran after.

The airship was level, nose moored to the iron tripod of the stub mast, crew-car swinging gently just above the ground. Willow stopped. *Her ship*. AME-7, nicknamed Percy. A huge

blunt-nosed fish for the air, back silvered with aluminum paint to reflect sunlight and keep the hydrogen from overheating.

“Painting the bags silver reduces the risk of uncontrolled ascent,” Danilewsky had said in his last lecture to their class, “but atmospheric disruptions such as a sudden strong updraft may—” He’d seen Ranjit’s eyelids droop. “Mr. Singh, tell us how you would deal with an unexpected ascent to 40,000 feet, assuming an airship of 150 feet, 81,200 cubic foot gas volume and 50hp engine.”

Willow had squirmed in the hard wooden desk, but now, looking at the caged 35hp motor and canvas-skinned steel skeleton of the car that would carry her and Giff, she found Danilewsky’s flat facts had power to chill. She saw herself clinging to cold steel bars as the ground swirled away, trees shrinking to shrubs, river to trickle, then all hidden by the cloud-layer.

Mick dashed up, head swiveling to look for Susie. “Make her give it back, Will. Danilewsky will write me up if I don’t have my cap.”

Susie had joined the fore ground-crew, Mick’s cap slantways on her dark head. Willow waved, finger-signed GIVE HAT. She chattered in protest, then spun it over.

A whistle from the stub-mast and the ground-captain’s shout. “Willow! Ready to mount!”

Veda hugged Willow. “You take care,” she said, face squashed against Willow’s flight-jacket. “Come back and tell more stories about the circus.”

“It’s a milk-run,” Willow muttered. “Easy, like Danilewsky said.”

Mick slapped Willow’s shoulder. “Never mind *you*, take care of old Percy. I want him next.”

Ground-Captain Dumont held out the manifest. Willow ran to grab it and clambered into the car to check her cargo against the list. Mail for the settlements of Marshden and Transmontane; newspapers and medical journals; medicines for the spring thaw fevers; pay-packet for the Transmontane silver miners, bound with two locks; all the matters that couldn’t wait for the slow ox-carts that brought heavy supplies and returned with crops and ingots. A small crate stamped ASSAY INSTRUMENTS: URGENT HANDLE WITH CARE. The manifest listed the contents as spectroscope and scales. What was urgent about that, Willow wondered. It’d be an almighty nuisance in the narrow car. She yanked on the leather straps of the cargo-bag, testing the buckles.

“All present, sir.” She waited for Dumont’s nod, then climbed up the ropes to check the fuel gauge. The generating plant provided hydrogen, but petrol was too precious to store

anywhere but an airfield. Willow tapped the compass, swung down and made sure the canvas ballast-bag bulged with water.

“Where’s your monkey crew?” Dumont asked behind her.

“Giff’s helping with the guyropes. Sir—you’re somethin’ fond of the chimps, and they like you. If you could take some time with Susie while me and Giff are gone—she’ll miss us bad.”

“I’ll bring her biscuits.” Dumont sounded as if he was smiling. “Have you three been parted before?”

“No sir. Not since the circus broke down.” Pus-fever had done for the struggling little carnival, bringing down the ringmaster, both clowns, and the camp cook. The disease picked and chose among the animals, claiming the ponies and trained seals but sparing the chimps, big cats, and the elephant. Willow had run herself ragged nursing the sick, feeding and watering the healthy animals until she’d dropped, expecting to die like the others. To her surprise, she’d recovered. Most of two years ago, that had been, and a few hundred miles away. “All correct in the car, sir. Ballonets deflated, ropes clear.”

“Right.” Dumont stepped away, quick despite the lame leg that kept him grounded. “Steady on the ropes,” he shouted. “Releasing from mast. And walk her out.” The ground-crew turned Percy into the wind, paying out rope until the car swayed at their head-height. “Ballast up!”

Willow stared at the web of cords around the wheel, suddenly forgetting which was which. Top gas valve, bottom gas valve, aft ballonet, ballast—*don't pull the ripping valve*. She closed her eyes and let her hand find the cord to spill ballast. Percy rose. The crew pulled, measuring buoyancy by the number of men needed to hold him down.

“Willow, start your engine and take on your crew.”

She opened her eyes in time to see Dumont's salute and return it. The little engine roared in its cage; propellers beat at the air. Braced against the frame, she felt every shift as the ground-crew played out ropes fore and aft. Percy jumped, as if excited to be set loose. They were off.

Giff came arm-over-arm up the guyrope. His weight held it taut; below him it waved and snapped, a switching tail longer as he drew closer. Willow leaned over, reaching, though he didn't need her hand and outweighed her enough to pull her out. The thump of him settling jolted the car.

Giff hooted. Shouts rose from the ground, laughter and warning. The car jerked and swung a second time, pitching Willow against the side. She pivoted to see Susie perched like a hairy gargoyle on the rail, feet and hands wrapped tight, toothy mouth open.

“Perdition, Susie!” Willow shouted into the streaming air. The ropes hung twenty feet above the ground, rising fast. The

ground-crew dwindled to midgets, then to dolls. She couldn't send Susie down the rope. She'd have to make a long circle back to the mast; the blimps banked wide in the wind. Foot on the rudder-pedal, she paused. How much petrol would that use? How much delay? What would the instructors do about Susie's disobedience?

She remembered standing before the governor's desk, overalls dust-white and threadbare from months of walking. Danilewsky had scowled out the window, Dumont smiling as if he knew a private joke. Giff had climbed up her, like he'd done since he was a scared baby, and Susie pulled at her hand, wanting to explore the room.

No sir, got no parents, no family, she'd sworn, just the chimps. No one to fuss if she got killed, that was what that was about. Would she sell the chimps and come alone? No sir, all or none, she'd said, trying not to think of hot meals and a warm bed every night. All three or none.

If she turned back, would they let her keep the run, or give it to Mick? With a sick feeling that had nothing to do with the height, she knew the governors would say Susie proved the chimps weren't trustworthy, were pets not crew. Willow couldn't feed pets, not on cadet's pay.

She hunched her shoulders under the serge flight-jacket. *No.* She wouldn't turn back and leave Susie. If she completed

the run to schedule even with Susie's extra weight, if she found Danilewsky's saboteurs, maybe the governors would excuse her disobedience. If she turned back, she'd have nothing on her side.

She signed BAD SUSIE BAD, then pulled the cord to release half the ballast-water. It didn't come near making up for Susie's 120 pounds, but if she emptied the bag, she couldn't adjust trim for landing.

Don't look back. Set your face forward and get the job done. The engine's growl and the wind tangling in the propellers wrapped her in noise. Giff and Susie, oblivious to disgrace, groomed each other.

As Percy's fat-goldfish shadow crawled over the plains and the sun rose to ride alongside them, Willow's spirits lifted. Flying was a grand thing. She'd envied the trapeze-artists soaring and tumbling, spangled barn-swallows under the striped canvas. But this was real flying, with the sun looking on and the wind on either side. She didn't want to lose it.

Bright yellow fields rolled out; she couldn't name the crop. She'd worked at farms for food and bed but never stayed long enough to learn much. Behind a grey-roofed farmhouse, a tiny blue-skirted figure stopped pegging white patches to a washing-line and waved at the blimp. Willow leaned out and waved back.

She signed to Giff to come to the wheel. Finger-signing was one circus-trick Danilewsky had approved, helping crew talk against engine roar. While Giff held steady—showing off to Susie, she reckoned—Willow perched on the instruments crate and ate the breakfast Cookie had packed. Susie signed GIVE FOOD SUSIE. Willow shook her head. BAD SUSIE, she signed, but saved a handful of dried apple-rings for the chimps.

The gasbag expanded in the warmth. Willow let air out of the ballonets to allow space for the hydrogen, plucking the release cords with hardly a thought. The plain rolled away, changing through the morning from bare brown earth to bright fields to damp green patched with blue ponds and seamed with canals. A green line on the horizon warned of swamp. Marshden lay on its southern rim.

* * *

Marshden airfield was empty but for Percy's circling shadow, squeezed thin by the noon sun. The fuel-tank held only fumes, thanks to Susie's weight, and Willow had to tack with the wind to approach. One hour of free-ballooning practice under her belt, and each time the wind pushed her off-course she knew it wasn't enough.

An old man hobbled out when Willow halloed. Susie and Giff hooted as they swung out on the guyropes. Mooring took

both chimps' strength. The car rocked sickeningly as Willow crawled out to tie Percy down.

"Thank the lord you come," the old fellow said. "Medicines go straight to the infirmary."

"They're to be signed for," Willow said. "D'you have signing authority?"

He stared, watery eyes blinking. She wondered if he was simple. "None but me here. I can't read nor write."

"Someone has to sign for the medicines," Willow said. "They're valuable. I can't hand them over to just anyone." Her stomach hurt, and the ground felt hard and strange. She couldn't be slack. She had to work off Susie's black mark.

"Doc Santiago do?" He looked pleased to come up with a name. "I'll take you to him straightways."

The old man—Durs was his name, he said—hitched a jumpy little grey to a pony-cart. Willow made sure of the blimp's mooring. The instruments were likely safer left in the car than jolted in the pony-cart, but she released the cargo-bag and hung it over herself like lumpy leather Armour. With Giff and Susie by her, no thief in his right mind would try taking it. The chimps might act like clowns, but they could pull a man's arm clean off. She told Durs that, but he grinned and let Susie flirt with him.

“Fever come on quick,” Durs said, as if Willow had asked. “Spring thaw always lets bad air out of the swamp, but this time it brought somethin’ special.”

They bounced along the muddy main street. Shops were shut and boardwalks empty, though the day was fine and clear. Black wreathes splotched doors, marking deaths. Yellow fever-flags hung on the town hall and church. *None at the airfield. Likely feared I’d not land if I saw them.*

She knew the infirmary by the smell, before Durs pointed at the peaked roof and high windows that showed it had been the schoolhouse. The stink brought back all her memories of the dying circus, of sponging fever-sweat from faces that didn’t know her, of carrying buckets of pus-soaked rags. *Something special*, right enough. Pus-fever.

At Durs’s shout, a man came out to the street. He wore stained and wrinkled linens and a white mask. “Stay back,” he called, and tossed a white clump to Durs. “Put masks on before you come closer.”

Masked, they came together by the cart. “Y’need to sign for the medicines,” Willow said apologetically, but he’d already penciled a signature on the manifest and was running his finger down the list. Intent on packets of powders and dried plants, he hardly blinked at the chimps.

He looked up. “Thank God. But it will take me a good three hours to heat and mix these together. Durs, you’ll have to tend the patients while I do that. Six have blisters ready to break. I hate to risk you, but we’ve no one else able-bodied—”

Willow took a breath through the stifling mask. It smelled of bleach and lavender. The clever part of her brain told her *get out, keep on schedule*. The stupid part opened her mouth. “Reckon I’m immune,” she said. “I nursed most of a dozen with pus-fever and it never touched me. If y’got nobody else, I’ll help. The chimps are immune too, and they can move patients, fetch and carry.”

Santiago’s brown eyes stared hard at her above his mask. “Later I want to hear more about this immunity. Now let’s get to work.”

“Yessir,” she said, and signed COME to Giff and Susie.

* * *

The sun dropped, glaring through the tall windows into Willow’s eyes, as she and the chimps lifted the sick, washed their blisters and spread sulfa powder, laid clean sheets under them and at last fed them the medicines Santiago concocted. When she broke for a scrambled meal of fried potatoes and salt-beef—cooked by Durs—Willow could hardly keep her words straight.

“We didn’t have proper medicines,” she mumbled, “but the townsfolk died as fast for all their doctorin’.”

“What did they try in the town?” Santiago leaned forward, ready to snap answers from the air the way the seals had snapped fish.

Willow rubbed her eyes, dragged memories from the clouds of weariness. “Blistering and cupping. Mercury. Nothin’ worked.”

“You never came down with it.”

“No sir. Thought I had, when they was all dead, and the big cats and elephant taken by the county for debt. But the blisters never came up. Likely I was just worn out.”

“Get some sleep,” Santiago said. “I’ll wake you in four hours.”

Willow stumbled off to join Giff and Susie, curled in a nest of blankets and straw. They made room for her with welcoming sleepy grunts.

* * *

It wasn’t only the pink morning light that made the Marshden sick look healthier. They opened their eyes, smiled at the doctor and stared at the chimps.

“You ain’t delirious,” Willow said again and again, lifting fever-thinned men and women for their draught of medicine. “We’re just left over from a circus, is all.” Part of her ached that

there'd been no doctor cooking medicines for her folks. She wanted to be leaving.

Doctor Santiago came to see them off and gave her two letters, one for the Transmontane doctor, the other for the A.M.E. governors. "To excuse your delay."

Dall handed her a sloshing tin of petrol. "No charge," he said, grinning. "A gift for my Susie-gal." Susie hooted and covered her eyes bashfully.

Two chimps, a doctor, and a simple old man made a strange ground-crew, Willow thought as she shouted directions. The milk-run would seem dull after this.

* * *

Percy circled, mirrored in inky water, dropping gradually below drooping tree-tops. In the muddled green, black, and reflected blue of the swamp, the generating plant stood square and strange. Rust-red dirigible masts poked up: a tall one for rigid passenger-ships, a shorter for two-man mail blimps. Twice a year Aerial Mail crews came to make repairs, replenish materials, and clear underbrush so nothing bigger than a rat could creep up unseen.

"Looks clear," Willow muttered. At her sign, Giff and Susie jumped to the fore and aft guyropes. She cut the engine and they went arm-over-arm down. Percy bounced as they touched ground, and fought the ropes until Willow fastened his nose to

the short mast. Joining the chimps, she signed STAY CLOSE and started looking for damage.

Two giant wooden barrels held scrap iron, a target for swampie theft. Above them, a tank of sulfuric acid perched on a runner track. Willow sighed in relief to see it untouched. Mixed with lake water, the acid sprayed over the iron to make hydrogen. A gasometer forced the gas through washer tanks, scrubbing it clean of arsenic, sulfur, and phosphorus, to make it safe for the airships.

At water's edge, the outflow taps glistened in green-tinged light. Willow squatted and touched the transparent slime covering them. She snatched her stinging hand back, fighting an impulse to suck it. *Don't put it in your mouth, dummy, it could be poison, acid.* Her fingertips were red and hot, a blister rising on the second finger. *Perdition!*

She smelt the sickish stink of muronine, added to the odorless hydrogen to warn of leaks. The taps weren't tight shut, and gas from the last operation was trickling out. Who'd been careless, an Express pilot or a thief? Who'd steal hydrogen? The pirates flew nimble little gyroplanes, not awkward blimps. She scratched her head with her stung hand and stopped, swearing.

With her folded handkerchief, she tightened the stiff taps. How had slime got there? Swampies weren't slimy monsters,

just men who'd run off to the swamps and stayed. Sometimes crazy, always thieving, but just men.

Willow cut a fishing-rod from one of the spindly trees fringing the lake. If Danilewsky's saboteurs were watching, better they think her lazing than spying.

Percy bobbed cheerfully at the mast. She should deflate the gasbag to conceal him. But even if she didn't believe half Mick's stories, the idea of being trapped at the plant turned her stomach.

* * *

Giff and Susie jumped through the moss-hung trees, tossing mud and leaves at each other, screaming happily. Would the noise scare off saboteurs? Or did it sound ordinary, like the mournful birds calling across the swamp?

The fishing-rod jerked, and Willow scrambled to her feet to draw up her catch. A whiskery catfish as long as her forearm, bending the rod like a fish double the size. Willow backed so the fish would fall on the bank if it broke free. It struggled on the line, shimmering in the—*shimmering*? Willow squinted and lowered it to the grass.

A glass-clear bag half-covered the fish's body. Light struck rainbow sparkles from the bag and from the long blue-tinted feelers clinging to the yellow-brown catfish body, fouling its fins and tail. A pale blue sac pulsed inside the bag. Willow

remembered tall tales about air-squid, descending from the heights to wrap long strangling arms around airships and rip the gasbags open with their parrot-beaks. She shuddered.

But this was a jellyfish, only big enough to tackle a catfish, and had no beak. Willow groped for the short branch she'd laid by. She was doing the catfish a favor, she reckoned. Better have your brains knocked out quick-like than be slowly stung to death.

Stung? Willow stood open-mouthed with the branch dangling. The clear stinging stuff on the taps, could it be jellyfish slime? The winter storms were just past; storms might wash the jellies against the outflow. Waves or debris might jar the taps open a touch, though they'd been hard enough to close. Danilewsky's sabotage was maybe only weather damage, fixed by a grate around the outflow.

Willow danced a clumsy jig on the mud. She'd found an answer and paid part of Susie's debt. Remembering the catfish, she looked down. The jellyfish had slid to the water's edge. It plopped out of sight. The catfish gaped and flapped half-heartedly.

"Mostly I don't feel sorry for catfish," Willow told it. "But you've done me a favor, so I'll do you one back." Holding it cautiously behind the head, she plucked the hook from its jaw

and tossed it well out into the water, past where the jellyfish lurked.

Less than two hours she'd taken, where Danilewsky had allowed a half-day. Ahead of schedule for today, with a letter to excuse her delay in Marshden. She whistled for the chimps and trotted to Percy for the next leg of the milk-run.

* * *

Transmontane airfield was a graveled patch made by blasting down the rocky walls. A dozen figures ran out as Percy made his first circle. The chimps poked black heads over the rim of the car, and the men yelled questions.

"They're trained," Willow shouted. "They'll help with landing." Wind surged between the crags, tugging the blimp up when she directed it down, shoving when she tried to slow. At Willow's sign, Susie lowered the trail-rope, a coil as thick as Willow's wrist. The landing crew caught the end and looped it under the snatch-block. For a time it was tug-of-war with the blimp, heave and pull until the guyropes came in reach. By the time Percy was moored, Willow was sweating despite the cool air.

"You're late," said a heavy-set man with a ground-captain's cap. "We thought a storm had caught you."

"Fever in Marshden," Willow said. "They're short-handed and I stayed a day."

“Fever?” The ground-crew crowded in, faces creased with worry. Giff didn’t like the sharp voices. He waddled over and climbed up her. The men drew back.

“Pus-fever,” Willow said, not trying to gentle it. “But it’s broken. New medicines.”

Questions stopped as two burly gray-jacketed men pushed through the ground-crew, followed by a sleek fellow in a frock-coat. “The instruments,” Frock-coat began, then gaped at the chimps. One of the gray jackets snickered.

Willow unwrapped herself from Giff’s arms. “D’you have signing authority, sir?”

The flunky snickered again. “He’s the Superintendent.”

“Then I reckon he can sign,” Willow said, keeping her voice steady. She knew their sort, men who thought a uniform and billyclub made them bosses. They’d plagued the circus, demanding bribes and favors. Now I got my own uniform, she thought as she held the manifest out.

The superintendent signed with a fancy flourish. “I hope for your sake nothing is damaged. This is not the—the escort I expected.” Susie’s black fingers reached up for his silver fountain pen and he flinched away. “You are not to depart until I am assured the instruments are in full working order.”

Willow signed SUSIE COME. “The chimps are as good protection as you can get, sir. Twice as strong as a man, easy.”

But she was talking to his back, for he'd gone to worry at the gray jackets as they heaved the crate out.

The ground-captain tapped her shoulder. "Come inside. I'm Krebs, airfield and postal clerk. Do you have a list of the, the dead in Marshden?"

Willow shook her head, sorry for those with family there. "I only saw the sick folks in the infirmary. Doc Santiago wrote a letter. He might've put news in it."

She saw no more of Transmontane than the office, but a pot-bellied stove fought the mountain chill and Krebs fed her fried eggs and salt-pork that she washed down with milky miner's-coffee.

"Don't drink it black," he said, passing her the chipped mug. "It'll stunt your growth."

"Better that way." Willow gave Susie a thick slice of turnip. "Lighter pilot, heavier payload."

"I'd give you a proper meal and a room, but since we struck—well, never mind, but since then the mine-owners have their men watching all ways in and out of town, and nobody goes anywhere but the mine and their houses. They'd shut down the tavern but the men would riot." Krebs jerked his head at the door, where another gray-jacketed, unsmiling man leaned. "Feltz there'll look over your cargo before he lets you go."

“He’s got no say over me,” Willow said. “I’m Aerial Mail Express.” If they didn’t discharge her when she returned. She gulped coffee against the cold thought.

“The owners are the law here,” said Feltz, rolling his head to squint at her. “You leave on their word.”

“They’re not the law in the air,” Willow said. “And they got no right to hold the blimp past schedule.” The governor wanted Percy back, that much she was sure of.

Through the day, dark-faced miners came to pay for their mail, to leave thumb-marked letters in return, to ask about the fever in Marshden. Some brought portraits, and Willow worked to match those posed and smiling images to the wasted, fever-flushed faces she’d seen. They all thanked her for trying, and a few shook her hand. She felt like a thief, taking credit Santiago deserved.

By the time the foreman and paymaster arrived to turn their keys in the pay-casket and count out the packets, the red sun rested on the mountaintops. Willow was near bursting to be out of the stuffy office, away from grief and Feltz’s beady glare. The chimps caught her mood and had to be sent outside for the sake of peace. When a boy ran up with the superintendent’s permission to leave, Willow came near hugging him in relief.

“Stay the night,” Krebs said. “The stove keeps the place plenty warm.”

Willow stared hard at Feltz’s hands as he fingered letters and packages, letting him know she didn’t trust him. “Nah, I’m late as it is. I got my compass and lantern, I can steer by the stars, needs be.” She hauled the cargo-bag from the table, walked out and waved Giff and Susie over. Feltz stuck by the door. Just as well; she’d be tempted to set the chimps on him if he followed.

Cold wind whipped across the stones, and Percy twitched and flinched against the ropes. Krebs fetched his crew while she fastened cargo and checked fuel and ballast. A pale head peered into the car. Willow jumped and swore before recognizing the foreman, a beaky-nosed blond fellow.

“Add this to the manifest.” He handed her a limp, heavy packet wrapped in thick paper. “For my sister in Marshden. Stones polished up for a bead necklace.”

“Yessir.” Willow penciled it in. “Marshden, sir? What’s her name?” The foreman hadn’t spoken to her, hadn’t asked for news of sick folk. Had he heard about the fever?

“It’s on the package,” the man said curtly, and ran off as the ground-crew bustled up.

* * *

Four hours later, clouds hiding the stars and miles of lightless swamp below, Willow wondered if she'd been wrong to leave. When the high whine of gyroplanes sounded over the blimp's engine, she was certain of it. Pirates without doubt, for who flew by night but thieves and fools? Damned stubborn fools like her.

Ahead, she caught the glow-worm smear of light that was Marshden and pushed on the rudder-pedal. The knot of fear in her chest loosened.

Then she remembered empty streets and barred shops, beds of sick folk. If the pirates followed her to Marshden, who'd stop them looting or worse? Tired-out Santiago? Hobbling Durs? Opening her dark-lantern a crack, Willow checked the compass. Her hands shook as she set her course away from Marshden, into the swamp.

Moon hidden, only the engine's roar and glow betrayed Percy's presence. She crossed her fingers for wind to rise, so she could shut off the engine and free-balloon. No wind came. She didn't dare look at the fuel gauge.

Straining her eyes across the mottled dark and light of the swamp, she glimpsed at last the dull mirror of the lake and pale bulk of the hydrogen plant. She brought Percy down, releasing hydrogen to speed descent. As she tugged the cords, clumsy plans thumped about in her head. If the moon came out, the

pirates would for sure see the blimp's silver-doped back. Could she deflate the bag, cover it with branches and mud? If Percy were only swamp-colored—

He is, dummy. He reflects like water. Willow kicked the pedal and steered to a tree leaning over the lake. Giff squealed, confused that she wasn't at the mast. Susie hopped, wanting to explore. In the scramble to disembark, unbalanced by the cargo-bag, Willow lost her footing and hung over the black water. Giff caught her jacket and swung her to the bank. Her legs trembled, or it might have been the quaking ground.

She stumbled to the plant, leaned against the damp wall of the pumphouse and tried not to remember Mick's stories of what pirates did with prisoners.

She should have gone on to Marshden. The pirates might've been scared off by the fever-flags. Why in perdition were they after the blimp on the *return* trip from Transmontane, after the payroll'd been delivered?

Susie had found a rotten stump and was disturbing the insects with a leaf. Giff had caught Willow's nerves and rocked on his knuckles, panting. He loped down and hunched over the outflow, clever hands busy.

Whine and whir of engines above, retreating or circling. A second gyro, then a third, quartering the swamp. Willow swore silently and crawled after Giff, not daring to call him back. A

few yards, but it felt like a mile to Willow's damp knees and elbows as she crept, feeling eyes on her from sky and trees. Any of the black stream-mouths might hold a flat-bottomed skiff of silent swampies. At least she could hear the gyros coming.

She was almost in arm's reach of Giff when he screeched and pointed. Willow squinted after his knobbly finger. At first she saw only grey lake under overcast sky, broken here and there by black spiked humps of reed.

In the water, cloudy lights floated. Moon-glimmer? Her heart jumped with fear. But these lights were blue or pink or green, hovering below the water's skin, not flashing on the surface. They gathered like watery lightning-bugs near the outflow.

Jellyfish, Willow guessed, remembering the pale blue sac of the one she'd chased off the catfish. The lake must be thick with them, but why here?

A blob of jelly squished up over the taps. Willow realised she'd been hearing hydrogen trickle. Giff had opened the taps, copying her earlier inspection.

The hydrogen was drawing the jellyfish the way syrup drew flies. Like the blue-jays she'd seen drunk on fermented fruit, flying crookedly and missing their landings. How'd you tell if a jellyfish was drunk?

Shining lumps covered both outlets; the jellyfish seemed to stretch. Their bodies swelled to the size of her two fists, lengthened—no, raised up. Lifted off the taps to bob in the air like toy signal balloons, glowing blue and green over their reflections in the still water. No trick of the chancy light. The jellyfish were floating, buoyed by hydrogen.

More jellyfish slid over the valves. The jays had done the same, going back to the rotten fruit until they were too tipsy to fly and could only stagger over the grass.

Engines whined overhead. Willow had almost forgotten the danger, watching the jellyfish swell and float like soap-bubbles. Mick would never believe this; it beat his air-squid stories hollow. If she lived to tell him.

Hold hard, she told herself, mouth drying with excitement. What if she got the plant running and turned the taps on full? Before she'd half-thought it out, she'd squirmed back to the pumphouse and clambered up top. The wheel of the acid tank stuck hard, giving her nothing but flakes of rust on her scraped hands.

“Susie!” she hissed. “Susie!” The chimp left her grubs for a new game. Susie loved to fiddle but was usually forbidden machinery. Willow showed her the wheel, and Susie spun it as if it were fresh-greased. GOOD SUSIE AWAY, Willow signed. Sulphuric acid sprayed into the barrels.

Susie waddled to Giff. Willow slithered to the outflow taps. No stick or tool handy to lever them open, so she wrapped her handkerchief around her hand. Teeth gritted, she reached into the yielding mass of jellyfish.

At first it was only cold. Her fingers closed over metal; jelly-venom seeped through the cloth with a thousand pinpricks. Her hand slipped. The pinpricks turned to sparks falling on her bare skin. *Get it done*, she told herself, gripped and turned. The tap stuck, gave. She dragged her arm back. *Dummy. Should've used your left hand.*

Second tap. She bit her tongue, thrust her stinging hand into the jellies, and jerked the tap open. The muronine stink doubled, overwhelming the swamp-smell. Willow pushed herself back, cradling her hand, staring ahead so as not to look at it.

Blobs of light floated above and below the lake surface. Light blurred the outflow, clumps lifting and splitting into airborne jellyfish.

Thin wind moaned overhead. Moonlight poked through cloud, splashed silver on the lake, on jelly-bags and tendrils. Willow whistled for Giff and Susie, picked up the cargo-bag, and staggered down. Sick pain crept up her arm. A shaggy man stepped from the trees to bar her path.

Willow stopped. “What d’you want?” No gyro had landed. A swampie. Alone, or part of an ambush? Giff bared his teeth and waved his arms. Susie howled.

The swampie’s whiskered face gaped in a toothless laugh, and he waved a short fish-spear at the lights over the water. “Good show, eh?”

“Good show,” Willow said. *Always agree with crazy folks.* “You like it?”

“Ev’ry time,” he said, and let her pass.

Willow toppled into the car. Clumsily she buckled the cargo down. Giff unhitched Percy. As Susie climbed in, Willow jettisoned the ballast. Landing was the least of her worries. Percy wallowed and floundered, gas-bag creasing, shrunken by the cool air. No time to refill, even if she could one-handed.

“Above the trees, Percy, that’s all I ask.” Willow rolled the wheel, begging for lift. A blue jellyfish the size of Giff’s head floated to her right. The one that had caught the catfish? All around, they glowed like paper lanterns. Laughter and cheers drifted up and Willow looked down. Painted with eerie colors by the jelly-lights, ragged men and women danced around the lake. “A fireworks show for swampies,” Willow said. “There’s your saboteurs, Mr. Danilewsky. Where’s my prize-money?”

Percy’s blunt nose pushed over the trees. Willow let him drift with the slow wind. Cursing her bad hand, she cut her

fish-line into two arm's-length pieces, clumsily knotted a fishing-weight to each end. Clouds broke and thinned; moonlight spattered silver from the airship's back. Her head swam. Weariness or jelly-venom?

Gyroplanes whirred. With Percy silent, Willow could place them northeasterly, close enough to see if the sky cleared. Another southeast. Flanking her, or still searching the swamp? She wanted to yell into the sky, ask what in blazes they wanted from her? Letters? A string of beads for a sick sister?

Why hadn't the foreman asked about his sister? He loved her enough to gather and polish stones for a necklace, but didn't care whether she was among the sick or dead? Willow scanned the sky, seeing jelly-lanterns bob, hearing another gyro join the hunt. Something Krebs had said tugged at her memory through the fever-heat of her arm. About the mine-owners' bully-boys coming in to watch all comings and goings, after—*after a strike*.

Time for speed, and damn the noise. Willow fired up the engine. The propellers spun, caught air and shoved it up the feed-tube to the ballonnet. Behind her, gyro engines spun to a higher whine, bearing down on their prey.

Willow looked back. The gyros were black wasps against grey sky. Between them and her bobbed specks of light like a trick of straining eyes. She grinned. Soon they'd meet. The first

pirate's shriek pierced the engine-noise. His gyroplane wobbled and dropped. Another scream, cut off by a muffled gurgle—jellyfish in the face? Willow winced. A gyro crashed through whippy branches. The swampies would have the wreckage picked clean by morning.

Others dodged and banked through the swarm, but Percy's lead grew. More lights bobbed up; Willow caught a sickly whiff of muronine. A third gyro's tail-rotor stilled, engine intake fouled by jelly.

Clouds opened; the moon lit the scene like theatre limelights. The last gyroplane shone silver-bright, drowning the frail jelly-glow splashed over it. Circling the blimp, the pirate reached for a holstered pistol—a flare-pistol to set the gasbag on fire.

Willow signed SWING BOLO. The chimps jumped for the guyropes, swung off the car. Percy shuddered as their weight shifted back and forth. Willow crouched. The pirate hesitated, startled by the flapping black shapes below the car. His hand hovered, dove, snatched the pistol out.

Willow pitched the empty petrol-tin at him. It fell short, and his smile cut a black line in his moon-white face. He raised the pistol. Willow fumbled for the ripping-valve, knowing it couldn't be quick enough.

Susie swung out and up. Her weighted fish-line spun from her hand to whip around the gyro-rotor. The plane tottered; the pirate grabbed the wheel. Steadying the gyro, he kept his goggled face on the blimp and raised the pistol.

Giff held his fire, let the rope swing back to meet the gyro's returning circuit. His bolo took the pirate in the face, wrapping his head and neck. The man's hand jerked, sending the flare high. Willow watched it soar, felt it scrape across Percy's back, bounce, catch on the rigging. She jumped for the rim of the car, wrapped her bad arm around the ropes. The flare sprayed, hanging inches below the bag. She scrambled higher, yanked at the ropes; the flare fell free, spiraling down into the swamp. She swung her head, looking for gyros.

The lightening sky was empty. Giff jumped aboard, followed by Susie. The car shook, jarring Willow's arm. She hoped the wind would be with her. The petrol would take her little more than halfway home.

* * *

Willow let the ground-crew tie Percy to the mast. She crawled over the lip of the car, well behind the chimps, who had leapt out, hooting to see their friends. Dumont caught her under the arms and set her on the ground.

Mick ran up. "Watch out, Will, better hide Susie. Danilewsky's sharpening his axe for..." His voice faded as he

took in her makeshift sling, the long scorch-mark on Percy's back, the leaves caught in the rigging. "Swampies? They were after you?"

"Nah," Willow said over her shoulder. "That was pirates. 'Scuse me, there's Danilewsky. I better report."

Danilewsky looked every bit as angry as Mick warned. He jerked his head to summon her. She followed him and Dumont into the office, where the A.M.E. governor waited like a thundercloud squashed into a dress-coat.

Willow twisted her courage up tight and slapped the parcel down, a small and shabby thing on the polished oak desk. If she was wrong— "The pirates were after this, sir. From a mine strike at Transmontane."

The governor slid his letter-opener into the packet, splitting it open like a trout. Rough glassy pebbles spilled onto the desk-blotter, slanted sunlight picking out sparks blue as midday sky. He lifted one to his eye and squinted through it. "Sapphires."

"The spectroscope," Dumont said lightly. "I thought it odd an astronomical instrument should go to a silver mine. But it will also assay gemstones."

The governor frowned at the blue pebble. "How did the pirates hear of this?"

“The foreman,” Willow said, able to breathe again. “He used Percy to smuggle these out of the mine, and must’ve signaled the pirates.”

“Ground-Captain, send word to Transmontane at once. With the spy identified, they have a chance to finish the air-pirates. Well done, cadet.” The governor let a narrow smile through. “No, let me say well done, Airshipman.”

“Sir, thank you! But my crew—Giff and Susie saved me, saved Percy. They deserve as much—”

“You are loyal, Willow,” Dumont said gently. “But your chimps are not crew, only clever animals.”

“Clever and brave,” said the governor, “but not always obedient—just like cadets. Enter the apes on the books as unranked aircrew, Flight-Instructor. They’ve earned it.”

Joy rose in Willow like a ballonet inflating. She bounced on her toes, eager to find Giff and Susie, tell them they all three had a place, together.

Danilewsky’s eyes narrowed. “Tell me, *Airshipman*, did you spare time from these heroics to investigate the sabotage at the hydrogen plant?”

“Yessir, I did. Found what caused it.”

“Ah. Pirates again? Or the fabled air-squid?”

In spite of her itching arm and grumbling stomach, Willow couldn't keep from grinning. "No sir, not squid. Jellyfish. Nothing but common old flying jellyfish."

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Barbara Gordon, despite her name, does not fight crime. By day she works at a university library, finding out-of-print books. By night she writes as-yet-unpublished books. After attending the Viable Paradise workshop, she sold her first story to Coyote Wild. Her blog can be found at bibsearch.blogspot.com.

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COVER ART

“Sabicu,” by Myke Amend



Myke Amend likes to mix the dark with the lighthearted, the serene with the chaotic, making pieces that can invoke different and opposing thoughts and feelings. He has been featured and/or interviewed in *Kilter Magazine*, *Dark Roasted Blend*, *IO9*, *Fantasy Art*, *Brass Goggles*, *Elfwood*, *Superpunch*, and many other web magazines and blogs. More of his work can be seen at <http://www.mykeamend.com/>.



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