

The airship Petty Snark soared above the slums and spires of the great city of Bombalay, heading out to sea. The four steam engines snorted and growled, the exhaust pipes belched and sputtered, the props rattled and hummed, the aluminum framework groaned and creaked, and the silvery fabric rustled and snapped – music to the ears of Captain Dermid Quigg, who sat in his big chair, gripping the armrests with his meaty hands, a grin broaching his broad, craggy face.

The collision avoidance gong sounded and helmswoman Tosta Cremager glanced up from the dime novel she was reading – “Seduced By Sasquatch.” A behemothian passenger liner was crossing their bow, and she recognized it instantly as the Lindberger, one of the oldest and largest dirigibles in the world, filled with highly volatile helium and equipped with eight double-boiler engines capable of producing twelve hundred chugs per minute. Tosta knew the Lindberger was as long as ten football fields, but she’d never seen a football field so she had no idea what that meant, except the Lindberger was very large and it would be unwise to collide with it. And so, calculating speed and distance with the agility of a Tabbage machine, she quickly deduced that the Lindberger’s stern would clear the Petty Snark’s nose by about one yard. Give or take a few inches.

“Eh, good enough,” she muttered, but gave the wheel a slight twitch to the right, just to be on the safe side, then buried her nose back in her book.

“You blasted idiot!” Captain Quigg roared as the Lindberger’s backwash buffeted the hull. “What are you trying to do, get us all killed?”

Tosta glanced up. “No, sir.”

“Well I’d hate to see how you’d do if you *were* trying! Put down that blasted book and pay attention to your duties, or so help me I’ll skin you alive!”

“Yes sir,” Tosta said with a sigh, setting the book face-down on the binnacle and gazing glumly out the windscreen.

When the turbulence cleared and the Petty Snark stopped shaking uncontrollably like a wet dog in a snow storm, the captain turned to his navigator and said, “Cribbins, plot a course for Damnasia.”

Every crewman’s head turned in unison toward the captain, as Chezzer Cribbins nervously replied: “Sir, did you just say Damnasia?”

“No, boy, I said ‘amnesia.’ I’ve contracted amnesia. Who are you, anyway?”

“I’m Cribbins, sir. The nav...”

“I was being sarcastic, you idiot! I don’t have amnesia. Although I sometimes wish I *could* forget this accursed ship and this damned crew! I said Damnasia and I *meant* Damnasia!”

“Captain, have you forgotten that Damnasia is on the Faustralian continent?”

The captain’s eyes widened in amazement. “I’ll be damned! I thought it was hiding inside your bloomin’ arse.”

The rest of the crew tittered. Chezzer’s cheeks reddened. The captain continued: “I know damn well where Damnasia is. And I’m delighted you do, too, considering you’re the flippin’ navigator. Now plot that course.”

“Sir, aren’t you forgetting there’s a no-fly zone over Faustralia? Any foreign craft intruding in that air space will be shot down on sight by their small but feisty battle blimps.”

The captain regarded the lad with steely gray eyes (one of his eyes actually *was* steel, being a replacement for his real eye, which had been lost in a fight some years before). He climbed from his troll-leather chair and strolled across the deck to stand next to Cribbins, and in an affable voice he said, “The key words are ‘on sight,’ Cribbins. And if they don’t see us, they can’t shoot us down on sight, now can they?”

“Begging your pardon, sir, but how do we avoid being seen? They’ve got watchtowers all over the coast, equipped with detector beams, and their air patrol pilots have night goggles, so even if we arrive after sunset they’re bound to spot us.”

“Not if we steer well clear of all those watchtowers and patrols.”

“How do we do that, sir? We don’t know exactly where they are. That’s classified information.”

The captain reached into the front of his coat and took out a folded piece of parchment.

“This is a chart of the Faustralian coast, pinpointing every watchtower and all their blind spots, and this inset here shows the routes taken by the patrols – and their schedule. This chart cost me a pretty penny, and if you follow it exactly we can sneak in right under the Fausties’ noses.”

He set the chart on the plotting table. The navigator bent down, studying it. “And what’s this red X for, sir?”

“The landing zone, stupid, what did you think it was? Smack dab in the middle of the Damnasian Forlornlands it is, and we’ll fly through Ginormous Gulch to get there, so no low-beam sweeps can spot us. If the unloading goes without a hitch – and it better – we’ll be back in international airspace within two hours, with the Fausties none the wiser.”

Chezzzer straightened up. “I apologize, sir.”

Quigg patted the young man on the shoulder. “Apology accepted. Now, if it isn’t too much trouble, would you mind plotting a course for Damnasia?”

“Certainly, sir.”

“Oh, there’s one more thing, Cribbins.”

“Yes sir?”

Quigg moved his massive hand from the lad’s shoulder to his throat. His fingers dug deep. Chezzzer gagged and tried to pull away, but was helpless in the vice-like grip. His hands seized the captain’s arm and tugged frantically, but it was like trying to bend a steel pipe.

Maintaining his affable tone, the captain said, “If you ever question one of my orders again, I’ll rip your bloody head clear off your scrawny neck.”

He gave the throat one last squeeze and released it. Cribbins lurched against the plotting table and sank to the floor, gagging and wheezing. As Quigg strolled back to his captain’s chair, First Officer Notty Besott rose from hers and rushed to the lad’s aide, pulling a brass flask from the hip pocket of her coat and holding it up to Chezzzer’s quivering lips.

“Have a slug,” she said. “It’ll help.”

Chezzzer took the flask in trembling hands and tipped it up, sputtering as the greenish-brown liquid – a mixture of absinthe, rum, witchwater and distilled elf pee – burned down his throat. For a moment, panic filled his face, then relief.

“Better?” she said with a smile.

He smiled back. “Yes, ma’am. Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

He started to hand back the flask, but Notty shook her head. “You keep that for awhile.”

“Thanks, ma’am.”

She straightened up and swung around to face the captain.

“My, my, what a touching scene,” Quigg sneered. “Maybe you’d like to wipe his ass now, eh? You’d like that, wouldn’t you, Cribbins?”

Scowling, the navigator tried to rise, then thought better of it and sank down again. But Notty was in no mood to hold her tongue.

“This time you’ve gone too far, captain,” she said.

Quigg folded his arms over his barrel chest. “Have I, now? And what do you aim to do about it?”

Notty turned to Lulique Daniss, the radio operator, who had pulled off her headphones and was watching the scene in rapt attention while shoving peanuts into her mouth from a jar sitting atop the wireless set.

“Open a porthole, Lulique,” Notty said. “It stinks in here.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” Lulique said. She opened the porthole and watched, open mouthed, as Notty snatched the chart from the plotting table, crumpled it up and stomped toward her.

“What in blazes are you doing, woman?” the captain bellowed. “Stop! Stop, I say!”

He bounded out of his chair and rushed toward her, but Notty had once been the starting pitcher on the girls’ whiffleball team at Monchoster West Secondary School, and those skills had not deserted her. In one fluid motion she cocked her arm and hurled the wadded-up chart toward the porthole. It cleared Lulique’s shoulder by an inch, drifted three inches to the right as it was caught by the swirling breeze, and zoomed out the exact center of the porthole to begin a new journey amidst the clouds.

“You blithering morons!” the captain roared, his furious glare sweeping across the control room. “Why didn’t anyone try to stop her? Of all the incompetent, stupid, treacherous simpletons it’s ever been my misfortune to command, you all take the cakes and ale! Dammit, I don’t have time for this, but you leave me no choice. All engines stop!”

He turned toward Tosta, who once again had her nose buried in her dime novel, despite his direct orders.

“Helmsman!” he roared. “I said all engines stop!”

Tosta rolled her eyes. “Yes sir,” she said wearily, “right away sir.” She slapped down her book, grabbed the handle on the telegraph and yanked it upright. A few seconds later the engine room responded, the telegraph dinging as the red arrow on the dial swung around to “STOP.” The engines’ howl shifted to a growl ... a snarl ... a whimper, as the props unblurred and spun to a stop. The airship glided to a halt and hovered as Tosta turned to the buoyancy controls and twisted several valves, equalizing the pressure in the fore and aft liftanium cells.

Captain Quigg stomped back to his chair and jabbed the button on the speaking tube, bellowing into the mouthpiece: “Mangrud! Hupton! Get your asses down here! It’s whipping time!”

He grabbed the front of the right armrest and jerked it up, reached into the compartment beneath and took out a cat-o-nine-tails, then turned around slowly, his eyes spearing into one crewman after another as he tapped the whip gently against his palm, letting the nine thongs slip through his fingers like the locks of a lover’s tresses. His gaze finally fell on Notty and stayed there.

“You threw away my chart,” he said softly. “My Damnasia chart. I’ll have to buy another, if I can find the scoundrel who sold me the first one. You’ve caused me considerable inconvenience, Miss Besott.”

Notty stood there, arms akimbo, chin thrust out defiantly. “And what are you going to do about it, captain?”

Quigg walked toward her ... then abruptly spun to his left and thrust a finger at Lulique.

“Daniss!” he roared, making the radio operator jump.

She hopped to her feet, snapping to attention. “Yes sir?”

“You could’ve stopped this. Why in blazes didn’t you close that damn porthole?”

“There wasn’t time sir. It all happened so fast. I...”

“Assume the position.”

Notty took a step toward him. “Captain, I’m the one who...”

“Shut your yapper!” He turned back to Lulique. “I said assume the position!”

“Aye aye, captain.”

Lulique unbuttoned her coat and shrugged it off, then turned around, facing the bulkhead as she grabbed the sides of the radio table, bracing herself. The captain came up behind her, eyeing the creamy flesh of her back – like an artist sizing up a blank canvas.

The door to the control room opened and two people hustled in – a burly man in oil-stained coveralls and a slim, pointy-chinned woman wearing an apron, her hair pulled up in a tight bun.

“Gather around, children,” the captain said, “and see what happens when you’re naughty.”

He raised the “cat,” paused for dramatic effect, then brought it down, the “tails” slashing across Lulique’s skin, just above the bra line. She stiffened. He lashed out a second time and she hissed in pain, biting into her lower lip. He struck a third time and she whimpered, her knuckles whitening, her grip on the table tightening. Again and again the tails found their soft target, as blood oozed from the wounds, trickling down her back, dammed by the strap of her bra, soaking into the fabric. Now the captain started in on the bottom half of her back, watching thin rivulets of blood stream toward her rump. The wind from the open porthole caught a few drops, skittering them sideways, flinging flecks onto the deck. His eyes twinkled to behold the ballet of blood, delighting in nature’s artistry.

Once more he raised the whip up to his shoulder, prepared for yet another strike, but before he could unleash it the whip struck back, as one of the thongs reared up like a snake and curled itself around his neck. He flicked his wrist, trying to free the thong, but it held on tight. Mildly annoyed, Quigg lifted the whip’s handle above his head, turning it upside down and moving it counterclockwise, hoping to untangle the stubborn strand, but without success. Growling impatiently, he let go of the handle and grabbed the thong with both hands, trying to worm his fingers beneath it.

He couldn’t. It got tighter.

The captain’s expression changed from annoyance to consternation. His lips twisted into a grimace, his throat gurgling. Lulique turned around.

“Are we done already?” she said, and gasped as she saw what was happening.

Notty rushed to his side. “Captain, what’s wrong?”

“The whip,” he rasped. “Get it off! Get it off!”

Notty grabbed the whip’s handle and twirled it above the captain’s head, much as he had done, but with no more success. She gripped the handle in both hands and gave it a good yank, hoping to jerk the thong loose.

“You blasted fool!” the captain croaked, his face purpling. “You’re making it worse! Cut the damn thing free!”

Notty reached into her boot, drew her stiletto and tried sawing into the thong without nicking the captain’s neck. She didn’t succeed.

“Ow!” he said through gritted teeth. “I said cut the damn whip, not my throat, you stupid bitch!”

Notty dropped her knife and grabbed the handle again, twisting it like a screwdriver, hoping that would somehow force the thong to relinquish its death grip.

The captain sank to his knees, his face filled with panic, his hands scratching furiously at his neck, but the thong dug even deeper, breaking the skin. Blood trickled down his neck as his

grunts and gurgles grew louder, mixing with the crew's cries of alarm, and then his eyes rolled to the top of his head and his body stiffened, his arms falling to his sides, and he keeled over, hitting the deck hard, his face frozen in a death grimace, his eyes wide open, seeing nothing.

"Oh Goddess!" Notty said, her hands flying to the sides of her head as she sank to her knees beside him.

Chezzzer struggled to his feet and slowly approached. "Is ... is he dead?" he rasped.

Notty nodded.

"Oh my Goddess," Tosta said, dropping her book to the floor. "Poor Captain Quigg!"

"Merciful heavens," said Perk Hupton, clasping a bony hand to her chest.

"I'll be a monkey's uncle," muttered Tekket Mangrud, scratching his thinning hair.

"Damnedest thing I ever saw!"

Lulique gaped at the captain, then Notty. "What happened?"

"I don't know," Notty said.

"Ma'am?" Tosta said. "I hate to bring you even more bad news, but there's an airship off the starboard beam coming up fast and it's flashing a red signal light at us."

Everyone turned to look out the portholes.

"Dammit!" Notty said. "A patrol cruiser."

"You think we can outrun them, ma'am?" Tosta said.

Notty scrambled to her feet. "We're damn sure gonna try. Tekket, get back to the engine room and give us flank speed. Move!"

"Yes, ma'am," the engineer said, sprinting for the door.

A few moments later, the engines roared to life and the ship surged ahead.

"Hard to port!" Notty commanded. "Show them our backside!"

Tosta spun the wheel to the left, swinging the Petty Snark away from their pursuer. The engines howled. The props chattered. The ship shook. Notty saw the fingers on Captain Quigg's right hand tremble slightly, and for a moment she hoped he might be alive after all, but it was just the vibrations of the deck stirring his dead flesh. She looked away, wincing.

"Still closing, ma'am," Tosta said, eyeing the cruiser in the aft-view periscope.

Lulique had hastily donned her coat – although the buttons were in the wrong holes – and now resumed her seat at the wireless, holding one side of the headphones to her left ear, listening intently. After a few moments she looked up.

"Ma'am, they're signaling us on Hail Frequency 1, ordering us to halt."

"Are they Vindanian?"

"No, ma'am. Foggish."

"Dammit!"

Another minute and the Petty Snark would be in international airspace, beyond the jurisdiction of the Vindanian Air Patrol. But the warships of the Foggish empire recognized no boundaries, and would pursue them to the ends of the earth if necessary.

"No point trying to outrun the bastards," Notty grumbled. "Stop engines."

"Aye, ma'am," Tosta grumbled, yanking the telegraph handle.

As the airship once more glided to a halt, Chezzzer approached Notty and muttered, "Should we jettison the cargo, ma'am?"

She shook her head. "No. They'd see us. And probably write us up for littering on top of everything else." She turned toward the corpse of her captain. "And we already have enough to answer for."