

OF HEROES AND AIRSHIPS

Victor Lorthos

“McTavish!”

The bellow came from Old Man Bergom's office and was loud enough to make us all jump. His metallic cane slapped his desk with a sharp crack.

“McTavish! In my office now, boy.”

I stood guiltily up from my desk and slunk through the smirks and sneers of my fellow reporters of the *Marandian Times*. Curs, the lot of them. I was the youngest of them all, a fresh faced journalist just out of University. I had only hours ago turned in my first ever piece for the *Times*, and they clearly relished the browbeating I was about to receive at the hands of our most feared Senior Editor. I stopped at the threshold of his door. His office was stacked high with papers, reams of foolscap, books, maps, all the detritus of the long time newspaper man. Bergom himself, a stoutly bearded gentleman, glowered at me.

“You wished to see me, sir?” I asked with a quaver.

“Yes, come in Arthur, and close the door.” He reached into a drawer of his enormous desk and removed a clear glass container of brown liquid. As I stood there in silence, he allowed himself a generous few gulps, corked the bottle and slid it back into its place with a smooth, oft practiced motion. Then he stared at me.

“This article you've given me, boy, I can't run this. It's shite. What were you thinking?”

“Well, sir, I thought...”

“No! You did not think!” His cane slapped the table again, and I flinched. “I sent you, by gods, to deliver a report on a flower show, a simple task, even for a wet behind the ears fop like yourself. Ladies having tea, oohing and aahing over daisies and such. Important people there, wives of dignitaries and the local nobs. Simple! And

you return with this sordid pulp-fiction tripe!” The rubberized tip of the cane stabbed threateningly in my direction now.

“I just found that...”

“Shut your hole! What is this about a, what did you call it...” He glanced at the stained sheets of foolscap on his desk, my own precious words. “A ‘Flower Mafia’? You implicate the Duchess of Yingshire in a bloody illegal flower smuggling ring? You claim the sainted Mother of our own Abbey stabbed a man over a cart of roses? Are you out of your sodding mind?”

I felt my flush begin to rise beneath my collar. “All of those facts can be accounted for, sir. I have witnesses and the sworn statements of a man on the inside...”

He cut me off with another crack of the cane. “Man on the inside? What, this, this porter that you drone on about for paragraph after paragraph? The man is a savage from the Hinterlands, a slave and an Elf, for god’s sake, and you think his word enough to accuse some of the most powerful elites in Marand? I ask again, are you mad?”

“It is the truth, sir! Every word of it!” I stood trembling with anger, fists balled and face red. He pushed back in his chair for a moment and studied me. I was rightly incensed, considering. I’d put hours and hours into what was supposed to be a silly fluff piece for the society pages only to have it turn, unexpectedly, into some sort of mad caper, a terrifying glimpse into the awful favors of the bourgeoisie and their decadent gardening habits. I knew it was a bit much, especially coming from a untested reporter, but it was Truth. A bad habit of mine, Truth. One I seem to have a knack for, though.

Bergom sighed and pushed back his chair.

“I believe you, Arthur, I do.” He stood and waved me to a seat as he limped over to a small cabinet and removed two heavy leaded tumblers of crystal. Taking the bottle again from his desk, he deftly filled them with whiskey and proffered one to me. “And truly, I have to say it’s a cracking good read. For a first story, it is quite a thing.” He toasted me and drained his glass in one shot. Somewhat taken aback by the change in temperament and not being much of a drinker at the time, I managed to cough and sputter my way through a couple of sips. The dark liquor burned my throat and

assaulted my sinuses with fire. Bergom laughed at my attempt. “That's the good stuff there, boy, I bought it off a Dwarf in the Old Town quarter, he brought it down from the mountain. They say the good stuff has Goblin blood in it. Hah!”

As I essayed a weak smile, he sat on the edge of his desk and continued. “Look now, I understand what you have here, I just cannot run it at this time. There is a war on, Orlanian airships are raiding our borders, there is fear and mistrust in the streets, and the last thing we can afford, as a news sheet, is to start a row with this city's most influential and dangerous citizens. But for all that, it is a good piece, and you stood up for yourself. For the Truth. I like that, it reminds me of someone I used to know.”

I opened my mouth to ask a question but the look in his eyes stopped me, so I buried my nose in the glass again and tried another bit of Dwarven whiskey. I felt the fire in my belly begin to spread like a dull warmth to my limbs, couldn't tell how much of the feeling was the drink or the rare praise.

Returning to his chair, he slid a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles upon his nose. “So now it's time we see what you're really made of, boy.” He picked up and surveyed a piece of paper. “Are you familiar with the Royal Company's Autopen 100 Portable Typewriter?” I shook my head, confused. “It alleges to, let's see here, ‘utilize the most wondrous and delicate of clockwork mechanisms, driven by hand-wound springs, to practically automate the writing process and pull most divers and beautiful words from the hands of craftsmen and laymen alike.’” Bergom snorted derisively. “Bollocks. But Mr. Charles Royal has graciously given us one of the damn things to try out, so pick it up at the desk downstairs along with a manual. You're going to need it.”

I stared. “Whatever for, sir?”

He tossed a packet of papers across the table toward me and I fielded it, barely. “This is your boarding pass and Letter of Intent for the airship *Wolf's Bounty*. The captain there owes me a favor for some years now and has agreed to take you on for a limited time, provided you ‘don't get in the bloody damn way.’ Her words, not mine.”

I scanned the papers in my lap. “What am I to do aboard the *Bounty*, sir? I'm no sailor.”

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“You do what you're made to do, boy: you write. Our readers want to know about these airships, how they work and what the crews are like and what their role is in defending Marand from the predations of Orlan. You do whatever they ask you to do, you write everything you can, and ah yes, the *Wolf's Bounty* is a privateer airship operating under a letter of marque. A hunter of pirates, to be more specific. So, you know, try not to get killed.”

I finished the whiskey in a gulp.

Of Heroes and Airships, a Tale

Arthur McTavish, reporter, *The Marandian Times*

“Meeting the *Bounty*”

It was a few moments before dawn as I stood, collar of my coat up against the cold wind, upon the airship dock in West Marand. Beside me a valise of my personal items and the forty-pound case containing the Royal Autopen 100 Portable Typewriter. The dock bustled with activity in the dim light as workers scrambled to rig moorings and shift crates of supplies for the next ship to make berth. The first rays of dawn begin to peek over the horizon as she approaches, lighting the sails and illuminating the colors of her flag. Slowly, majestically, the *Wolf's Bounty* slides into the dock and gently bumps the posts.

The airship is enormous. Its gigantic inflated envelopee is a dull gray in the light, the countless cables and ropes wrapping it to suspend the large wooden ship underneath a flat black. The ship itself is huge, with two upper and two lower decks that I can see from my vantage. It bristles with strange engines and cannon and an ornate if somewhat lewd figurehead of a, um, “bountiful” woman with a wolf's head. I am struck by the grace of its entrance and the fearsomeness of its presence. This is a warship, a thing of destruction and power. And also, in its way, of beauty. I am overcome for a moment.

So it is that I'm standing open-mouthed like a schoolboy when a rough looking character, an older man with a ragged cap and a piece of leather tied over one eye tapped me on the chest and

growls, “‘Ere you lot, you boardin' or just gonna gape there? Aye?”

I recovered and presented my pass and Letter. “Good man, I am boarding your vessel, yes. May I please see your Captain. I believe she is expecting me.” He favored me with a sneer.

“Oh is she now? Well I'm the ship steward, and I hope for your sakes, laddie, you be true. Follow me now.” I shouldered my bag, hoisted the ridiculously heavy Autopen and followed him up the dock and over the gangplank, past dozens of men carrying bundles and barrels of provisions on board. We stepped onto the deck, a scarred field of thick oak planks, and I immediately felt the disquieting motion of the ship, a subtle yet very noticeable rock and sway. A wind made the deck pitch and I stumbled, to the laughter of my companion. He helped me to my feet.

“You got a groundling's legs, boyo. Try to stay upright now. Use the deck cables as you have to.”

I grabbed a rope with my free hand and managed to stay on my feet as we made our way to the fore deck. I struggled to climb a ladder with the Autopen case in hand, a ladder that seemed to shift and yaw with my every movement, as my guide scrambled nimbly up the ropes to wait out my ascent with what I believe to be a grin. Finally I hauled myself over the top to stagger upright upon the deck. As I huffed and puffed and fought to keep the morning breakfast down, a curse rang out followed by a bellow like that of some sort of bull-creature.

“Smitty! What in all the hells is that and why is it on my deck!”

I beheld a giantess. A woman tremendous in stature, clothed in a man's clothes of red and white. A tight bandana barely holding back cascading red hair. Gold rings on fingers, in ears, and one prominently through her nose. She swung a huge cutlass in my direction. This was our captain, the Fire of the Air, the Terror of Marand, Captain Redwolf of the *Wolf's Bounty*. A legend, a hero of the Orlanian War, and about to skewer me for daring to intrude upon her ship.

Smitty barely contained a smirk. “‘Beggin' your pardon, Cap'n, he says he you be expectin' him, aye.”

“What is this foolishness? State your business, groundling, quickly.” I noticed she didn't lower the blade, so I slowly withdrew my Letter of Intent while babbling an explanation.

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“I’m from the *Marandian Times*, you see, and I’ve been sent here on assignment to write about the *Bounty* and its crew. Um, the papers are right, uh, here. My editor Mister Bergom said he spoke with you, er.”

She took the letter and examined it critically. “Hmm? Old Georgie Bergom, that bastard? He’s still alive? What is this here now. Ye gods.” The Captain stuck the cutlass into a sash and held out a hand. “Well McTavish, it would appear I’ve been shanghaied. Bergom’s called me on a favor now, so I suppose you’re our guest here for the while. What are you? A reporter for his awful rag?”

I took her hand and she crushed mine in a most painful and manly fashion. The pain along with the unsteady ship movement and my general feeling of shock conspired against me. I managed a weak nod before turning a few shades of green. Redwolf laughed.

“Get him to the starboard, Smitty, he’s about to lose himself.” I was hauled to the side and draped over a railing as I let go of the morning’s meal and possibly the previous evening’s as well. Unfazed by my plight, the Captain continued. “Well here’s the deal, reporter. You have a berth on the *Bounty* until we get tired of you, I suppose. In the meantime, write whatever you want, just don’t bother me or my crew. If you get in our way, I’ll throw you over from a mile up myself. Welcome aboard. And don’t worry about the sickness, most groundlings get it, it’ll pass. Hah!” And she slapped me on the back hard enough to nearly put me over the side right there.

Below, lines were cast off and the *Wolf’s Bounty* began its slow, majestic ascent into the heavens. As I watched the retreating Earth, I wondered, and not for the last time, what I had gotten myself into.

“A Crew of Sailors and Occasional Miscreants”

For the first few days, I languished in my cabin where every pitch and rock of the vessel seemed determined to push my stomach out through my ears. Smitty would occasionally look in upon me, shake his head, and refill my water jug. As I could, I wrote my observations, and this was my first experience with the Autopen,

possibly the most damnable contraption to ever empower and impede a writer. It as an object is quite appealing, all gray metal and intricate clockwork mechanisms. Once wound by the handle in the back, every peck of a key causes a round ball of typeface to dip into an ink-moistened pad and strike the foolscap sheet wound tightly around a drum. It returns to the beginning of a line without pressing a key or level and has a wire hopper for paper which it automatically loads. When it works, it is a marvel of 1800's technology, enabling me to crank out often pointless words at a much greater rate and much clearer type than my unfortunate penmanship allows.

When it works.

What they fail to explain in the manual is how any given thing, say a sharp strike during travel which maligns a gear, a slightly too dry ink pad, a loose piece of paper, or apparently, just a mote of dust in the wrong place, can screw the works so completely and bizarrely that I have at least five pages of the letter 'E' repeated, and would have had more had I not forcibly removed the ream of foolscap from the hopper. A certain amount of poking around in the innards and cursing followed and eventually it worked properly again, though I can take no credit for it. I believe the machine may be possessed by spirit creatures, but I shall bravely continue to try to explore its uses in the craft.

Finally, the terrible lurching began to seem more like a gentle rocking and I slowly regained myself and was able to venture out upon the main deck and observe the crew going about their work. The *Wolf's Bounty* slides along through the air often a mile or two in the sky, occasionally buffeted by the winds, and its crew is a constantly-moving team of wonders. I noticed right away that the discrimination and "separate but equal" Wards of Marand had no place here, with Elves, Dwarves, and Humans working, eating, and living shoulder to shoulder. The ship needs continual tending, lines must be adjusted and trimmed, the huge bladed engines that direct the ship must be always maintained, giant gas bladders in the envelopee regulated, and of course, as we are at war, all cannon and weaponry kept in a state of readiness. This crew is composed of veterans of that war and they bear the scars of conflict. They are an insular and coarse lot, given to vulgarity and low humor. I sought to possibly work my way into their company, but they viewed me as

an outsider and untrustworthy, often falling silent as I walked past their groups. Until I found, in the bottom of my valise, a bottle of the fine Dwarven whiskey with a note attached from Bergom, which read, "Arthur, it is often found that drink makes friends faster than words, use wisely." I gave it to Smitty by way of thanking him for caring for me during my sickness, and the next night when he stopped by my cabin, he casually mentioned that "the boys" would be gathering in the hold much later that night for "a few games of chance and a bit of the drink, if yer interested."

And so it was in the wee hours, I descended into the hold of the ship, a dimly lit place where the crew gathered to entertain themselves during the long stretches between engagements. The assembled sailors were somewhat cold to me at first, but warmed up quickly when Smitty opened the Dwarven spirits and passed them around, courtesy he said, "of Mister McTavish, a fine gentleman, even if he can't keep a meal in him in a breeze." This provoked a raucous laughter and merriment. He took a healthy draught and coughed.

"Aye, that's the creature, right there." He handed me the bottle and favored me with a look, "So you be a reporter, aye? What you be reportin' about us, say?"

I took a slug of my own, barely managing to keep from coughing, and answered, "Stories, you know. The things you do here and there, why you do them. What made you sign up for an airship crew?"

He laughed, "No story to that, boy; me father was an airshipman and his father before him. I've got grease and airgas in me blood now. Twern't no other thing I'd rather be doin'." The others nodded and murmured agreement.

"Well what do you do here? What is running an airship like?" I passed the bottle to my left

"Like?" He snorted, "It's bloody hard work is what it's like, and no mistake. Nothin' interestin' about that, except when we catch a bloody damn Orlan ship and tear it to flinders. Aye lads?" There was a chorus of ayes all around. "Now when we get to port in a rum spot, there's where you have the good stories. Hey Roberts?"

A tall fellow turned and asked, "What d'ya want, ya daft ol' coot?"

The one-eyed steward grinned, “Tell this fella about that time in Sootshire, when you went to that new-fangled hoor house and they tried to sell you on the Mechanical Jenny.”

There were hoots and catcalls as Roberts blustered, “Hey now, that's not a thing for decent people to hear, you devil.” But the old man would not be deterred and caged poor Roberts into telling his tale, which is far, far too ribald for me to relate here but in essence involved a sort of wind-up prostitute and Roberts' unfortunate adventures with her accompanied with vigorous hand gestures. The bottle was passed around, with a few others. This led to more stories, more drink, and for a while it seemed the men were trying to simply top each other with tales of decadence and mad adventure. I partook my share of the bottle, I must say, and though some memories are blurry, I seem to recall a bit of a singalong and possibly some sort of rough dancing, perhaps by me. Details are blessedly sketchy. I know this though, at the end Smitty started up a tune, a sad somber thing, and it was picked up by each man in turn, until they all sang. I could not make out its meaning at first, then it weighed in upon me with the weight of mountains.

It was a dirge.

I only wish I could remember the words, it brought forth feelings of pain and loss, of suffering and long nights adrift on the currents of the air. Of the beauty of open sky and the danger it contained, of the fear of the “long sleep,” their words for death. As they sang together, I was moved to tears.

It was beautiful.

As it faded, Smitty raised his glass to the men and said, “Here's to us, lads, and to the one's what have gone before. The long sleep will claim us one day, but until then, we all have the sky.” Glasses and mugs went up all around the shadowy circle of the hold, and we drank and stood silent for a moment. Then he shook himself like a waking man and turned to me.

“Come along now, I've got to get you back to quarters, and us to work.”

I collapsed into my bunk, the words of the dirge echoing in my head, and found the gentle sway of the airship and the steady low rumble of its steam engines comforting as I drifted into slumber.

The sky, they said, we all have the sky.

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“Ships in the Night on Fire”

The damnable Autopen was bugged again and I was reduced to scratching out notes on loose sheets of paper. A fortnight had passed since my introduction to the crew in the hold, and though I had repeatedly requested an audience with the Captain, none had been forthcoming. My automatic typewriter, the pride of the Royal company, had been reduced to making the occasional “ping” and nothing else. I beat upon it, cursed it, swore to its destruction a hundredfold times. Eventually, it would condescend to accepting a few sheets at a time, and plodding out letters at half-speed.

So it was, in the midst of my frustrations and cursings, that I was summoned to the main deck sometime after midnight. I gathered what I could and staggered up the stairs, grunting under the weight of the typewriter but determined to capture events as they unfolded. I managed to make it across and up the ladder much more smoothly this time. Captain Redwolf greeted me with a smile.

“Ah, here's our writer now, getting yer ship legs now, eh? Good, you'll need 'em, because we're about to cross into the “No Mans Land” near the Orlanian border and it gets dicey from here on out. Of course, I'm not a man, so I suppose I can give not a damn about that, ha!” She snorted in laughter and slapped me on the back hard enough to stumble me. I took stock of the bridge. The pilot's chair dominated the center, behind the main wheel and the various levers that controlled the huge bladed engines on either side of the ship. I had conducted some hasty reading on airship function and design before coming aboard, so I knew enough to realize that though the airgas within the many-chambered rubberized envelopee above us kept the ship aloft, the steam powered engines, with their nested and specially shaped blades, controlled the airflow about the ship and gave it direction and drive. All of which required a precise pair of hands and even feet. It was said an airship must be piloted with the whole body and I admit I was somewhat surprised to see what I thought to be a mere slip of a child in the pilot's chair. Then I looked closer and realized that this was no girl, but an Elven woman, strapped to the chair, feet and hands on various levers,

leaning with the ship slightly as her actions caused it to pitch or yaw. My surprise must have shown on my face, as the Captain nudged me with an ungracious elbow.

“Don't you worry now, she's a mean one but we've got her tamed to fly the ship for us.” The dark-haired pilot responded to that remark with a rude gesture and the Captain laughed. “Well, only mostly tamed. That's Lily-of-the-Moon, of the Hinterland Raiders, pilot extraordinaire.” The Hinterland Raiders I had heard of, Elves that used much smaller versions of the giant Marandian airships, often in teams with unpowered single man gliders, to prey on merchant ships and even sometimes smaller military vessels. Their ability was legendary, as was their savagery. Redwolf continued, “See, we take all kinds aboard the *Bounty*. I care not what you were or what you did before you came here, so long as you pull weight and are loyal to the ship.” As she consulted with the pilot over various charts, I surveyed the night sky, hauled the Autopen from its case, and began to write.

The *Wolf's Bounty* moved through darkness and low-hanging clouds. Visibility was limited to a few hundred feet in any direction. Near the Orlanian border there were patrol airships to be concerned of, and of course pirates, savages, perhaps the occasional Dragon. My new friend Smitty had not been amiss in his description of the various dangers. Below me the crew ran their lines with practiced ease, but I felt I could sense a new tension in their movements, a seriousness I had not seen before. The Captain and the pilot argued over their position and whether they could expect an encounter that evening or no.

This was a point rendered moot as flares and cries of “Ship ahoy!” rang from the port bow. From nowhere, the war had come to the *Bounty*, and also, to me.

Smaller cannon lit by the ship watchers had flung bright burning bundles on parachutes out through the sky, and in their brilliant light I could see the formidable outlines of not one, but three airships bearing the red flag and yellow crescent of the Orlanian fleet. They were closing on our position fast and Captain Redwolf was quick to respond, shouting orders to the crew below.

“Load the guns, boys! Lily, ahaul to starboard now, easy! Wait for it lads! Now fire!” With a thunderous crash, the starboard guns

rang out and I watched steam cannon rounds slam into one vessel, destroying timber and flesh alike. Flaming, it floundered helpless in the air's current, but the two other ships were ready to retort. I fell to the deck as the broadsides raked the *Bounty*, and barely managed to hang on to the Autopen when the ship listed violently to one side. The Captain was unmoved.

"Put those fires out!" she screamed, "Ready the hooks, prepare to repel boarders! Fight, you bastards!" She drew her own cutlass and a wheel-lock pistol and caught my eye with a mad grin. "A bit more than you bargained for, aye Mister Reporter? Well we be in it now, you stay here, these Orlanians haven't got us yet." She flipped me the pistol and I just barely snatched it, by the barrel.

Eyes wide I asked, "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"The Orlanians are famous for their treatment of prisoners." Captain Redwolf's features hardened in the red light of the spreading flames, "If we cannot best them, I suggest you use it on yourself." Then she seized a nearby loose cable and lept to the main deck below, shouting orders even as she descended. I drug the Autopen to a railing and clung on for life, only able to watch as below me...

All hell descended upon the *Wolf's Bounty*.

For my witness to make any sense, I must start with the beginning.

Airship combat, in the modern age, is a deliberately and intricately choreographed ballet of destruction. In the seconds of recognition of an enemy vessel, broadsides of cannon are exchanged. Some of these munitions are solid iron balls, weighing fifteen or even twenty pounds, driven by steam fired cannon to amazing velocity and designed to smash apart vital enemy structure. The hope is that one ship can puncture another's steam boilers or disrupt their lines of pressure, leaving them immobile, helpless and at the whims of the wind. Some cannon are loaded with phosphorus ammunition, thin metal canisters designed to break apart into clouds of flame upon impact, burning wood and cable and men. A few are so called "grapeshot", loose metal fragments aimed higher to rake the decks of able fighters. The wounds left by these munitions are terrifying and often infectious, many is the sailor I've seen with scars upon their bodies. They aren't designed to kill, these rounds,

only to mutilate and injure with the idea that a grievously wounded fighter is not only unable to fight, but a further burden to his comrades if they do survive. It is an action of attrition and terror, an idea unconscionable and horrifying.

It is the totality of War.

I shake even now as my trembling fingers put these words to paper. My life has been one of cushion, of deliberately chosen ignorance of the ways of the world and the ways of war. Never have I witnessed such a thing, such madness, such barbarity inflicted. All of our striving as Men, as a people of Reason in an age of Knowledge, all of it rendered seemingly pointless in those few violent minutes of time.

I cannot always face it now; there are times when I wake up cold and shaking, visions of blood and fire and death writ large upon my vision.

But I must record it here.

The second stage of combat is the boarding maneuver, where airships are brought swiftly as close as they can bear, and steam cannon mounted cables are fired upon iron hooks. These hooks dig into the wood and entangle the cabling and sometimes tear apart a sailor. When the lines are secured, the airships are locked in a circular dance from which there can be no escape until one is destroyed and cut free. The Orlianian ships struck the *Bounty* from both sides, ensnaring her in an enormous web over which slid and crawled what seemed to be an infinite number of scarlet-clad enemy, guns and blades bristling. I gaped in terror as this wave of men swept upon the main deck and turned the normally pristine bright wood into a blood-slick nightmarish melee.

The sailors, whom I'd been drinking with only a few nights before, fell upon the invaders with a fury unmatched. Smitty himself seemed to become a one-eyed demon, armed with a wicked knife and a clockwork wheel pistol, the kind that can fire several shots from an intricate series of chambers before emptying. The rest of the men gave a fell accounting of themselves as well. For my part, I am ashamed to admit, in my fear and shaking I dropped the weapon I'd been given. I was paralyzed. Overcome with terror.

It... It is hard to say that here.

I felt a movement at my elbow and jumped violently, thinking myself about to die. A laugh made me realize that standing next to

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me was Lily-of-the-Moon, unstrapped from a now useless pilot's chair and carrying an intricately carved long bow and a leather quiver of arrows. She grinned at me with a twinkle of madness in her eyes.

“Buck up now, Mister McTavish! The Captain will see us through yet, by all the gods!” And she leaned over the railing and unleashed a hail of arrows into the invaders. I watched her missiles fall as men were struck down or pinned to the deck. I realized she was clearing the Orlandians from around her Captain then, creating a circle of death about a whirling giantess. Captain Redwolf fought with a fury unmatched, dealing death and decapitation to whomever she met that day. The rage with which she attacked seemed to be in equal measure to the damage her ship had sustained. It was as if she would make the enemy pay in blood for every broken timber or burnt spar. The assault faltered before her advance and the men rallied around her and just for a second, my heart surged thinking that yes, perhaps, we would win this day.

Until the Orlandians unleashed a monster unto our midst.

As a child, Ogres were the monsters under the bed. The boogeymen that would come to seize us if we didn't eat our peas. You know of what I speak, the never witnessed but often described monsters of legend. As adults we overcome such fears, knowing that even in a world as diverse as ours, a magical place of Elves, Dwarves, Humans, and yes, even Orcs, that a creature of that sort could never really exist. Not really, we tell ourselves. No.

And we were wrong.

It was ten feet tall and gray skinned, with eyes of blackness and the teeth of a shark, and it came across the cables to the *Wolf's Bounty* like the harbinger of death that day. Incredibly muscled, clad only in a loincloth and a belt of human skulls and wielding an enormous spiked ship's beam as a weapon, it swept through the ranks, tossing aside scores of men like so many tenpins. It *roared*. My bones turned to jelly at that sound, I still can hear it as I imagine our ancient ancestors heard it echoing through the forests of the night. None could stand before its might, what was once a

rally turned immediately into a slaughter. But our Captain, the Hero of Marand, the Fire of the Air, answered its roar with one of her own, and charged the beast, cutlass raised high.

She was struck down, crumpled into a bloody heap on the deck.

Beside me, Lily-of-the-Moon howled with anger, her quiver empty. I gripped the railing with bloodless hands in shock as the men of the *Bounty* surged forward, only to be met with that unrelenting meat grinder of a giant nightmare with a spiked club. The Ogre loomed over Captain Redwolf, club raised high to finish her. There was no hope. All was lost. All around me was flame and darkness and blood and death and then...

My fear.

Turned to anger.

I cannot accurately describe this, although words are my stock in trade, my only craft. Something in my heart broke loose, I think. Perchance a valve unknown to me, mayhap a surge of madness burst through some critical wall and swarmed into my brain. I remember feeling heat, smelling smoke and blood, and hearing my own voice screaming and screaming and screaming while my hands found the only weapon I could muster to the Captain's aid as she lay helpless and bleeding with a monster astride her very life.

I lifted the Royal Company's Autopen 100 Portable Typewriter over my head and hurled it, with every curse I've ever known, from the upper deck, and forty pounds of Marandian steel smote an Ogre between the eyes.

There was a sickening crunch heard even above the sounds of battle and a high pitched squeal from the beast as the Autopen destroyed its face. It staggered backwards, bleeding and crying out, and fell over the railing of the *Bounty* to plunge into darkness and the cold, cold ground some two miles below. I would like to say to you, dear reader, that I uttered a pithy comment at this time, perhaps something like, "The Autopen is mightier than the sword!" or "The End!" but I cannot truthfully claim such a thing. I can shamefully admit to an animal-like cry of rage and anger that escaped my ragged throat when the monster went over, perhaps even a high pitched, some would say womanly cry of relief when the Captain staggered, bleeding but upright, to lead her men on a rallying charge which swept the decks of invaders, but what man would admit such a thing? It is a fact though that Redwolf went on

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to inspire them so much that the battle ended with the destruction of one Orlandian airship and the narrow escape of the other. A fact that we escaped, only barely, to limp back with an injured ship and a more injured crew, slowly to the Marandian lines and a friendly port for repairs.

It is also a fact, a sad fact, that my friend, Chief Steward William Bonneville Smitty, did not survive the battle. I found this out some time after when the dead were laid out below decks. As a longtime crew mate and exemplary sailor, Smitty was afforded the highest honor, the Sky Pyre. Each airship, you see, carries a small supply of smaller airgas envelopes, to be used as emergency escape or to supplant the main envelope in case of failure. Smitty was placed in a lightweight casket, soaked thoroughly in flammable liquid, attached to a small envelope of airgas, set alight, and cast off the bow of the ship at dusk. The entire crew assembled and, as the flames consumed the form of Chief Steward Smitty, returning his soul to the sky, they began to sing.

The long sleep will claim us one day he said, but until then, we all have the sky.

“A Return to Ground”

I stood, collar unbuttoned, and watched the *Wolf's Bounty* slowly pull away from a dock in West Marand. Beside me was a valise of personal items and a few reminders of my trip, as well as a delicate slender bottle of a fine Elven wine, with attached instructions to feed it to Bergom so “that stumpy bastard can know what a good liquor tastes like.” Also is a forty-pound case containing the somewhat sticky remains of the Royal Autopen 100 Portable Typewriter. I intend to give glowing reviews to its manufacturers along with some suggested improvements involving possibly spikes or perhaps concealed guns. The dock around me bustles with activity but all I can see is the rapidly receding form of a Captain of some repute, red hair loose and flaming in the sunset, as she waves good bye across an upper railing. There was a long time coming to this port, and she and I had many nights in her quarters for her to talk and me to listen to an entire book's worth of stories

Dreams of Steam II Brass and Bolts

and more. Perhaps I will write that too someday.

But for now, as my legs get used to a surface that doesn't constantly move underneath, and as the last rays of light slide across her decks and sails and the *Bounty* slips slowly into the night, it is enough.

I have a story to deliver.