



## The Cinder Spires: The Aeronaut's Windlass

By Jim Butcher

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And as Grimm undertakes this task, he learns that the conflict between the Spires is merely a premonition of things to come. Humanity's ancient enemy, silent for more than ten thousand years, has begun to stir once more. And death will follow in its wake...

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“So Jim Butcher is writing futuristic dystopian steampunk? You had me at Jim Butcher, actually. But the rest is cool too....Great action scenes, a fascinating world, and characters of a sort I've never seen before. Yup. This is everything I've come to expect from Jim Butcher, but in a delightful new flavor.”—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Patrick Rothfuss

“Wow. Just wow. Beware fellow readers, herein lies adventure that will keep you from food or rest...It is as if Jules Verne, H. Rider Haggard, Patrick O'Brien and...well, Jim Butcher all got together and wrote a book. Steampunk done very, very right. Butcher proves yet again that he is an amazing storyteller.”—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Patricia Briggs

“This is Jim Butcher at his best, drawing a fully realized, richly detailed, and downright fun literary world where fearless aeronauts ride the aether, brilliant wizards struggle with doorknobs, and a thirty-pound feline warrior keeps a pet human named Little Mouse. It's steampunk meets magic with a dose of sci-fi for seasoning. Buy it and read it. You'll be glad you did.”—*New York Times* bestselling author David Weber

“Butcher opens the imaginative Cinder Spires series with this sweeping fantastical epic...[It's] a fascinating, adventurous, and intricate story. Butcher brings a fresh and exciting perspective to secondary-world steampunk, giving the reader a thrilling ride.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Butcher, the bestselling author of the Dresden Files, now launches the Cinder Spires, a new epic fantasy, steampunk hybrid series that has shades of both Naomi Novik and Cherie Priest...With shifting points of view, short chapters, fast-paced action, and awesome battle scenes, the large cast of characters, elaborate world building, and intricate plot are revealed quickly and realized fully. It all reminds readers of when they first fell for Harry Dresden.”—*Booklist* (starred review)

“[Butcher] blends familiar steampunk and fantasy elements (airships, wizardry, and heroes from a monarch's guard) in a fresh and wonderful way that results in a fantastic ride. This should well satisfy fans of fantasy, sf, or their stepchild steampunk.”—*Library Journal* (starred review)

#### About the Author

A martial arts enthusiast whose résumé includes a long list of skills rendered obsolete at least two hundred years ago, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author **Jim Butcher** turned to writing as a career because anything else probably would have driven him insane. He lives mostly inside his own head so that he can write down the conversation of his imaginary friends, but his head can generally be found in Independence, Missouri. Jim is the author of the Dresden Files, the Codex Alera novels, and the Cinder Spires series, which began with *The Aeronaut's Windlass*.

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### Prologue

*Spire Albion, Habble Morning, House Lancaster*

“Gwendolyn Margaret Elizabeth Lancaster,” said Mother in a firm, cross voice, “you will cease this nonsense at once.”

“Now, Mother,” Gwendolyn replied absently, “we have discussed the matter at length upon multiple occasions.” She frowned down at the gauntlet upon her left hand and rotated her wrist slightly. “The number three strap is too tight, Sarah. The crystal is digging into my palm.”

“Just a moment, miss.” Sarah bent nearer the gauntlet’s fastenings, eyeing them over the rims of her spectacles. She made a series of quick, deft adjustments and asked, “Is that better?”

Gwendolyn tried the motion again and smiled. “Excellent. Thank you, Sarah.”

“Of course, miss,” Sarah said. She began to smile but glanced aside at Mother and schooled her expression into soberly appropriate diffidence.

“There has been no discussion,” Mother said, folding her arms. “Discussion implies discourse. You have simply pretended I wasn’t in the room when I broached the subject.”

Gwendolyn turned to smile sweetly. “Mother, we can have this conversation again if you wish, but I have not altered my intentions in the least. I will not attend Lady Hadshaw’s Finishing Academy.”

“I would be more than pleased to see you enter the Etheric Engineering Academy along with—”

“Oh!” Gwendolyn said, rolling her eyes. “I’ve been working with those systems in the testing shop since I could walk, and I’m quite sure I will go mad if I have to endure two years’ worth of introductory courses.”

Mother shook her head. “Gwendolyn, you cannot possibly think that—”

“Enough,” Gwendolyn said. “I will enter the Spirearch’s Guard. I will take the oath. I will spend a year in the Service.” She turned to regard her reflection in the long mirror, adjusted her skirts marginally, and straightened the lapels of her short bolero jacket. “Honestly, other daughters of the high Houses take the oath. I cannot imagine why you’re making such a fuss.”

“Other Houses are not the Lancasters,” Mother said, her voice suddenly cold. “Other Houses do not rule the highest habble of the Council. Other Houses are not custodians of the sternest responsibility within all of Spire Albion.”

“Mother.” Gwendolyn sighed. “Honestly, as if the people living in the lower levels of the Spire are less worthy somehow. And besides, those great vats and crystals all but mind themselves.”

“You are young,” Mother said. “You have little appreciation of how much those crystals are needed, and not only by those of Habble Morning or the Fleet, or of all the planning and foresight that must go into producing a single crystal over the—”

“The course of generations,” Gwendolyn interrupted. “No, apparently I have not been enlightened to your satisfaction—I would, however, submit to you that another repetition of this particular bit of pedantry seems unlikely to correct the situation, and that therefore the least frustrating course of action for all involved would be to abort the attempt.”

“Gwendolyn,” Mother said, her eyes narrowing. “You will return to your chambers in the next ten seconds or I swear to God in Heaven that I shall beat you soundly.”

Ah. Now they came to it. Gwendolyn suppressed a flash of purely childish fear, and then one of much more reasonable anger, and forced herself to consider the situation and the room in a calm and rational manner.

Mother's outburst had been so entirely appalling as to freeze Sarah in place. The maid was perfectly aware that such a display of emotion from one of the leading ladies of Habble Morning was not something that should be witnessed by the hired help. Mother, in her anger, had been quite inconsiderate, since Sarah didn't dare simply leave the room, either. How was the poor girl supposed to react?

"Sarah," Gwendolyn said, "I believe I heard Cook mention that her back was still giving her trouble. I would appreciate it if you ease her duties this morning. Would you mind, terribly, delivering Father's breakfast to him, and sparing Cook the stairs?"

"Of course not, Lady Gwendolyn," Sarah said, bobbing in a quick curtsy. She flashed Gwendolyn a swift smile containing both gratitude and apology, and moved from the room with sedate efficiency.

Gwendolyn smiled until Sarah had left the room, then turned and frowned faintly at Mother. "That was not very thoughtful of you."

"Do not attempt to change the subject," Mother said. "You will take off that ridiculous gauntlet at once or face the consequences."

Gwendolyn arched one eyebrow sharply. "You realize that I am armed, do you not?"

Mother's dark eyes blazed. "You wouldn't dare."

"I should think I would have no need to do such a thing," Gwendolyn replied. "However, I care to be beaten even less than I care to live out my days in this dreary mausoleum or one precisely like it. I daresay that at least in the Service I should find something to interest me." She lifted her chin, narrowed her eyes, and said, "Do not test me, Mother."

"Impossible child," Mother said. "Take her."

Gwendolyn realized at that moment that Mother's threat and outrage alike had been feigned, a pretense that had distracted Gwendolyn until a pair of the House armsmen could approach her silently from behind. She took a quick step to one side and felt strong hands seize her left arm. Had she not moved, the second man would have had her right arm in the same moment, and her options would have been far more limited.

Instead she seized the wrist of her assailant, pivoted her weight into him, robbing him of his balance, breaking the power of his grip at the same time, and continued her smooth circular motion into a throw, dumping him over one hip and onto the floor at the feet of the second armsman. The fallen man tripped the second, who struggled to push up from the floor. Gwendolyn lifted her skirts slightly and kicked the second man's arm out from beneath him. He dropped down onto the first man with a surprised grunt, and glared up at her.

"I'm terribly sorry," Gwendolyn said. "It isn't personal." Then she gave him a calm, sharp kick to the head. The man let out a short grunt and dropped limply, stunned.

"Esterbrook!" Mother said sharply.

Gwendolyn turned from the two downed men to find Esterbrook, captain of House Lancaster's armsmen, entering the room. Esterbrook was a lean, dangerous-looking man, his skin worn and leathery from years of the pitiless sunlight borne by aeronauts and marines. He wore a black suit and coat tailored in the same style

as the uniform of the Fleet Marine he had once been. He bore the short, heavy, copper-clad blade of a Marine on one hip. The gauntlet on his left hand was made of worn and supple leather, though the copper cagework around his forearm and wrist was as polished and bright as Gwendolyn's newer model.

Gwendolyn focused her thoughts at once, stepping away from the stunned men and lifting her left hand to present the crystal held against her palm to Esterbrook. She sighted her target, the captain's grizzled head, in the V shape made by the spread of her first and second fingers. By the time she had, her gauntlet's crystal had awakened to her concentration. Cold white light blazed from it, changing all the shadows in the room and causing her mother to blink and squint against the sudden radiance.

"Good morning, Captain Esterbrook," Gwendolyn said in an even tone. "I am well aware that your suit is lined with silk. I feel obliged to advise you that I am aiming at your head. Please do nothing that would require me to put my training to such tragic and wasteful use."

Esterbrook regarded her from behind his shaded spectacles. Then he reached up very slowly with his right hand, removed them, and blinked a few times against the etherlight of the weapon Gwendolyn held trained upon him. His eyes were an eerie shade of gold-green, and his feline pupils contracted into vertical slits against the light.

"Quick," he commented.

Gwendolyn felt herself smile slightly. "I had an excellent teacher, sir."

Esterbrook gave her a very small portion of an ironic smile, and tipped his head to her in acknowledgment. "Where in the Spire did you find someone to teach you the Way?"

"Cousin Benedict, naturally," she replied.

"Ha," Esterbrook said. "I kept smelling the perfume on him. Thought he'd taken up with a woman."

Mother made a wordless, disgusted sound held tightly within her throat, barely audible past her tight-closed lips. "I have expressly forbidden your close association with him, Gwendolyn."

"Quite, Mother, yes," Gwendolyn agreed. "Captain, if you would be so kind as to disarm yourself, please."

Esterbrook stared at her for a moment more, and then the lines at the corners of his eyes deepened. He inclined his head to her, then moved only his right hand to unbuckle his sword belt. It fell to the floor.

"What are you doing?" Mother demanded of him.

"My lady," Esterbrook said in a polite tone, "Miss Gwen holds a deadly weapon, and one which she is fully capable of using."

"She won't use it," Mother said. "Not upon you. And not upon her family."

Gwendolyn felt a surge of frustration. Mother was quite right, of course. Such a thing would be unthinkable—but she had no intention of continuing to live her life cloistered within Lancaster Manor, venturing out only for the constant, meaningless, regular, deadly dull boring routine of balls, dinners, concerts, and school. She could not allow Mother to call her bluff.

So she shifted her arm very slightly and unleashed radiant etheric energy from the crystal against her palm.

There was a howling scream of suddenly parted air and a blinding flash. It was followed an instant later by a deafening roar, like thunder, and a marble statuette sitting on a side table just behind Esterbrook exploded into dust and flying fragments. The fragments rattled and bounced around the room in the silence after the blast, and grew quiet only a few seconds later.

Mother stood staring with her mouth open, her face pale, half of her body already coated with fine marble dust. Esterbrook was coated with the dust as well, but he hadn't moved or changed his expression.

"Captain," Gwendolyn said. "If you would be so kind as to continue."

"Miss," he said, bobbing his head again. Moving very slowly, and keeping his left arm completely still and at his side, he unbuckled the straps of the gauntlet and let it fall to the floor.

"Thank you, Captain," Gwendolyn said. "Step aside, please."

Esterbrook looked at Mother, spread his hands in a silent, helpless gesture, and took several steps back and away from his weaponry.

"No," Mother snapped. "No." She took three quick strides to the chamber's fantastically expensive door, made from wood harvested from the deadly, mist-bound forests of the surface and bound in brass. She twisted its key until it locked, and then withdrew it. She returned to her original position with her chin lifted in outrage. "You will obey me, child."

"Honestly, Mother," Gwendolyn said, "at the rate we're going, we'll bankrupt ourselves redecorating."

Gwendolyn's gauntlet howled again, and part of the door was blown to splinters and twisted brass. The rest was wrenched from its brass hinges and flew out into the hallway beyond, tumbling once before it crashed to the ground.

Gwendolyn raised her arm until the crystal at her palm was parallel with her face and walked calmly forward, toward the door. The armsmen behind her groaned and began to gather themselves together. Gwendolyn felt a flash of relief. She hadn't wanted to inflict any serious harm upon the two men. Benedict had informed her that, with blows to the head, one could never be sure.

"No," Mother breathed, as she walked by. "Gwendolyn, no. You can't. You don't understand the horrors you might face." She was breathing very quickly and . . .

Merciful Builders.

Mother was crying.

Gwendolyn hesitated and stopped walking.

"Gwendolyn," Mother whispered. "Please. You are my only child."

"Who else, then, will represent the honor of the Lancasters in the Service?" Gwendolyn looked at her mother's face. Tears had made clean tracks through the thin layer of dust.

"Please don't go," Mother whispered.

Gwendolyn hesitated. She had her ambitions, of course, and her proper Lancaster reserve, but like Mother, she also had a heart. Tears . . . tears were unprecedented. She had never seen her mother weep except once,

with laughter.

Perhaps she could have been . . . somewhat more thoughtful about how she had approached her decision to enlist. But there was no more time for discussion. Enrollment for the Guard was this morning.

She met her mother's eyes and spoke as gently as she could. And she would not cry. She simply would not. Regardless of how much she might wish to.

"I love you very much," she said quietly.

Then Gwendolyn Margaret Elizabeth Lancaster walked out over the shattered door and left her home.

Lady Lancaster watched her daughter go, tears in her eyes. She waited until she heard the large front doors of the manor close to turn to Esterbrook.

"Are you well, Captain?"

"A bit surprised, perhaps, but well enough," he said. "Lads?"

"Lady Gwen," said one of the guardsmen, touching his cheek and wincing, "hurts."

"You didn't show the opponent sufficient respect," Esterbrook said, amused. "Go get some breakfast. We'll work on takedowns this morning." The men shambled out, looking rather embarrassed, and Esterbrook watched them, evidently pleased. Then he paused, and blinked at Lady Lancaster. "My lady . . . are you crying?"

"Of course I am," she replied, pride swelling in her voice. "Did you see that? She stood up to all three of you."

"All four of us," Esterbrook corrected her gently.

"Gwendolyn has never had a problem standing up to me," Lady Lancaster said in a wry tone.

Esterbrook grunted. "Still don't see why you feel a need for such dramatics."

"Because I know my daughter," she said. "And I know very well that the only way to absolutely ensure that she pursues any given course of action is for me to forbid her to do so."

"Reminds me of someone else who insisted on joining the Service, my lady," Esterbrook said. "Let's see. . . ."

"I was quite young and willful at the time, as you know very well. But when I left it was nothing like that."

"Indeed not," Esterbrook said. "As I recall it, my lady, you reduced three doors to splinters on your way out, not one."

Lady Lancaster eyed the captain and sniffed. "Honestly, Esterbrook. I'm all but certain that you're exaggerating."

"And half a dozen statues."

"They were tasteless replicas."

“And a ten-foot section of stone wall.”

“Mother was standing in the door. How else was I to leave?”

“Yes, my lady,” Esterbrook said gravely. “Thank you for correcting me. I see now that there is no comparison to be made.”

“I thought you’d see it that way,” she said. “You have good sense.”

“Yes, my lady. But . . .” Esterbrook frowned. “I understand that you wanted to steer her toward the Service. I’m still not sure I understand why.”

Lady Lancaster eyed him thoughtfully for a moment. Esterbrook was a faithful soldier, an invaluable retainer, and a lifelong friend and ally—but the warriorborn’s feline eyes tended to focus best on their immediate surroundings. She had no doubt that Esterbrook, if she so requested, could close his eyes and tell her the exact location of any object she could name in the room. But he’d have no idea where they were before the room’s most recent redecorating, or where they should go now that the centerpiece statue had been destroyed. The warriorborn dealt best with the present, whereas she, like the Lancasters before her, had to concern herself with the far past—and the near future.

“Events are in motion in the Spires,” she said quietly. “Signs and portents appear. No fewer than four fleet aeronauts have reported sightings of an Archangel, and swear that they were neither drunk nor sleeping. Spire Aurora has recalled her embassy from Spire Albion, and our fleets have already begun to skirmish. The lower habbles have become increasingly restive and . . .”

Esterbrook tilted his head. “My lady?”

“The crystals are . . . behaving strangely.”

Esterbrook arched a skeptical eyebrow.

Lady Lancaster shook her head. “I don’t know how else to explain it. But I’ve worked with them since I was a small child, and . . . something isn’t right.” She sighed and turned to regard the shattered door. “There are dark times ahead of us, old friend. Strife such as has not been seen since the breaking of the world. My child needs to see it for herself, to learn about those who will fight against it, to understand what is at stake. She’ll do that in his service, as she cannot anywhere else.”

“Strife,” Esterbrook said. “Strife seems something of a handmaiden to Lady Gwen already.”

Lady Lancaster looked at the shattered door and at the drifting dust, still swirling in the wake of her daughter’s passage.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “God in Heaven, Archangels, merciful Builders, please. Please go with my child.”

## Chapter One

Captain Grimm flicked the telescopic up off of the right eyepiece of his heavy goggles. The Auroran airship was a faint blot against the thick clouds below, while Predator was hidden high above in the aerosphere by the glare of the sun. A storm was roiling through the mezzosphere, the layer of heavy cloud and mist that lay beneath them, but there was still time to reach the enemy vessel before the storm began to interfere with the ships' systems.

Grimm nodded once, decisively. "We'll go in on the currents. General quarters. Run out the guns. Spread the web, top, bottom, and flanks. Full power to the shroud. Set course for the Auroran vessel."

"Sound general quarters!" Commander Creedy bawled, and the ship's bell gave three quick rings, repeated in a surging clamor. "Guns, make ready!" The command was echoed down the length of Predator as the gun crews raced to their turrets. "Spread the web 'round the clock!" Leather-skinned men in goggles and surplus Fleet aeronautical leathers leaped into the masts and rigging of the airship, shouting back their compliance. Creedy grabbed the end of the speaking tube and called, "Engineering!"

"Engineering, aye," came the tinny-sounding answer.

"Full power to the shroud, if you please, Mister Journeyman."

"Full power to the shroud, aye. And tell the Captain to blow the hell out of them before they can touch our shroud. That storm's too close. He times the approach wrong and we'll be naked."

"Maintain discipline, Mister Journeyman," Creedy said severely.

"Maintenance is what I do, idiot," snapped the engineer. "Don't tell me my business, you jumped-up wollypog."

"Let it go, XO," Grimm said very quietly to Creedy. He was smiling, if only barely, at Journeyman's response. The etheric engineer was quite simply too valuable to replace and the man knew it.

The taller, younger man scowled from behind his own goggles and folded his arms. "He should be setting an example for the other men in his compartment, Captain."

Grimm shrugged a shoulder. "He isn't going to, Commander. You can't squeeze blood from a stone." He folded his hands calmly behind his back. "Besides. He might be right."

Creedy gave the captain a sharp look. "Sir?"

"It's going to be very close," Grimm replied.

Creedy stared hard at the Auroran ship and swallowed. It was one of the rival Spire's Cortez-class ships—a large merchant cruiser much more massive than the Predator, carrying heavier guns and bearing a thicker shroud. Though the Cortez-class ships were officially trading vessels and not warships, they were well armed and had been known to carry an entire company of Auroran Marines. This ship, Grimm was sure, was the vessel responsible for the recent losses in Albion merchant shipping.

"Prepare boarders, sir?" Creedy asked.

Grimm arched an eyebrow. "We are bold and daring, Commander, but not maniacs. I'll leave that to Commodore Rook and his friends in the Fleet. Predator is a private vessel."

"Aye, sir," Creedy replied. "Probably best if we didn't linger about."

“We’ll rake their web hard, force them down, drop a buoy, and let Rook go after them,” Grimm confirmed. “If we stay for a slugging match, that storm could come boiling up and disrupt our shroud.”

“And theirs,” Creedy pointed out. Good XOs did that in the Fleet, playing the devil’s advocate to the captain’s plans. Grimm found the practice mildly irritating. If he hadn’t owed Creedy’s sister a favor . . .

“They have more and larger guns than we do,” Grimm replied. “And much more ship than we do. If we hang naked in front of a Cortez, the worst captain in their fleet would send us all screaming down to the surface.”

Creedy shuddered. “Aye, sir.”

Grimm clapped the young man’s shoulder and gave him a brief smile. “Relax. When Fleet disciplines young officers so decisively, they do it to make an impression—so that when they return to their duties in Fleet, they won’t repeat their mistake. They mean to put you to work again, or it would have been a simple discharge. They’ll not leave you habbled for long. Then you’ll be clear of Predator and in a properly armored hull again.”

“Predator is a fine ship, Captain,” Creedy said stoutly. “Just . . . a little more fragile than I’d like.”

And, Grimm thought, considerably less fragile than he knew. “Buck up, XO. Even if we don’t bring a prize ship back with us, the bounty for laming her and leaving her to Rook will earn us a tidy bonus. A hundred crowns a head, at least.”

Creedy grimaced. “While Rook rakes in hundreds of thousands of crowns in prize money. And buys his House a few more Councilors.”

Grimm closed his eyes and lifted his chin slightly as the men unreeled the nearly transparent ethersilk webbing. He didn’t need to watch to know the way the etheric web would change as the power runs carried electricity to it, making it stir and rise, becoming seemingly weightless. It caught the invisible currents of etheric energy coursing through the aerosphere, and the translucent silk strands, spread like great cobwebs for a good two hundred feet around the vessel itself, caught the force of the unseen etheric currents coursing through the skies and began pulling Predator forward. The slender ship gathered speed rapidly. The wind rose, cold and dry. Distant thunder from the sullen storm rumbled through the thin air.

The thought of Commodore Hamilton Rook gaining even more influence in the Spire didn’t particularly trouble Grimm. Most of the affairs of Spire Albion didn’t trouble him. Let the trogs in the Spires chew one another’s lips off, if that was what suited them. As long as he had Predator, he had everything he needed.

Kettle, the sailor at the control grips of the ship a few feet behind and above Grimm and Creedy, let out a short whistle. Grimm turned and lifted an eyebrow. “Mister Kettle?”

The grizzled sailor nodded down toward the approaching storm with his chin. “Skipper, you might consider a steeper descent than normal. Gravity will get us there quicker, and if the exchange doesn’t go well, we can just go right on past them into the clouds.”

“Mind yourself, aeronaut,” Creedy snapped. “If you have a suggestion, you can pass it to the captain through me. Those are the regulations on a Fleet vessel.”

“XO. This isn’t a Fleet vessel,” Grimm said quietly. “This is my ship. Let me think.”

Mister Kettle’s suggestion had merit. The extra speed of the dive would make the gunnery tricky, but their ship was sound, and they shouldn’t need miraculous shooting to disable the enemy ship in a surprise

attack—and they would commence the engagement a few moments sooner, ahead of the storm. He far preferred their chances if the Predator's shroud was intact around them.

Creedy, who could ride out a storm without blanching, began to look a little green at his captain's views of Fleet regulations. But he glanced over his shoulder at Kettle and valiantly attempted to continue to do his duty as he saw it. "A steep dive seems unnecessary, sir. In all probability they won't even realize we're upon them until the guns open up."

"We're a long way from home, XO. I'd rather not deal in probability." Grimm nodded back to the older sailor. "We'll do it your way, Mister Kettle. Inform the gun crews to adjust their firing angles."

"Aye, sir."

Grimm tilted his head and considered the strong breeze blowing across the deck. "Mister Creedy," he said, "have the men rig sail, if you please."

Creedy paused and blinked in surprise. "Captain?"

Grimm didn't blame the younger man for his reaction. Few airships utilized wind-sails these days. Steam-driven propellers and the new screwlike turbines were the preferred means of locomotion in the event that a ship dropped out of the aerosphere or was becalmed in some portion of the sky without etheric currents strong enough to propel a vessel. But sails had advantages of their own: They didn't require bulky, heavy steam engines to function, and they were—compared to steam engines, at least—nearly silent.

It was funny, Grimm mused, how often in life a bit of judicious silence could come in handy.

"Keep them reefed for now," Grimm said. "But I want them ready."

"Aye, sir," Creedy said, with even less enthusiasm than a few moments before—but he relayed the commands firmly.

After that, there was little to do but wait as the Predator took position for her dive. Standard battle gear included a harness with a number of attachment points on it. A lifeline was a six- to nine-foot length of heavy, braided line or leather with a clip on either end, and every man was required to have three of them on him when general quarters was sounded. Grimm and Creedy both hooked a pair of lines to the various rails and rings set about the airship for that exact purpose, cinching them in tight.

Once fastened in, Grimm paused to straighten his uniform. As the captain of an Albion merchant ship, he was not strictly required to wear one, but the crew had commissioned one for him after their first highly successful run as privateers. It was identical to the uniform of Fleet, but instead of his leathers being colored deep blue with gold trim, they were jet-black trimmed in bloodred. The two broad stripes of an airship captain adorned the end of each sleeve of his long coat. The coat's skull-shaped silver buttons had seemed a bit excessive to him, but he had to admit that they did lend the outfit a credibly piratical air.

Last of all, as always, he cinched tight the strap of his peaked cap, securing it tight to his head. Aeronauts considered it very bad luck for the captain to lose his cap when his ship dived into battle, and Grimm had seen too many odd things in his day to be entirely liberated from the superstition himself.

It took several moments to cover the miles of distance between the Auroran vessel and Predator, and tension mounted the entire while, thick in the chill air, its rigidity visible in the spines of the gunners and aeronauts. Ship-to-ship combat was the most destructive violence known to man, and everyone on Predator knew it.

Grimm played his role as he always did. The men were permitted to be nervous and fearful—it was the only sane response to their situation, after all. But fear was a disease that could swell and spread, incapacitating crews and bringing on the destruction that had been dreaded in the first place. The captain was allowed no such luxury as fear. The men had to be sure—not only suspect, but be absolutely certain—that their captain knew precisely what he was doing. They had to know that their captain was invincible, infallible, immune to defeat. That sure and certain knowledge was critical to the crew—it allowed them to ignore their fear and to focus their minds upon their duties, as they'd been trained to do.

Men who functioned as trained, even in the hellish fury of an aerial battle, were absolutely vital to victory. Such a crew tended to suffer far less injury and loss of life—and Grimm would sooner hurl himself off Predator's ventral mastworks than needlessly spend a drop of his crew's blood. So he did what he could to make them fight as efficiently and ferociously as possible.

He did nothing.

Grimm stood calmly on the deck, his lifelines neat and taut, his hands folded behind him. He stared ahead and allowed himself to show no emotion whatsoever. He could feel the eyes that shifted to him from time to time, and he stayed steady, a reassuring and confident presence.

Creedy attempted to emulate his captain, with limited success. He clutched one rail so tightly that his knuckles had gone white, and his breath was coming too hard through his flared nostrils.

“XO,” Grimm said quietly, smiling. “Perhaps your gloves?”

Creedy looked down at his hand and hurriedly removed it from the rail. He spent a moment fishing his gloves from his pockets and donning them.

Grimm couldn't blame the young man. This would be his first battle aboard Predator, a civilian vessel. Built of little more than wood, she was not clad in the sheets of brass and copper-shrouded steel armor a military vessel boasted. Should enemy fire penetrate her shroud, every blast would inflict hideous damage upon the ship and her crew alike—and a lucky shot could destroy her core crystal, unleashing a blast of energy that would spread both ship and crew across miles and miles of sky.

Creedy's fears were grounded in years of experience upon warships of Spire Albion's Fleet. Everything he knew told him that he was about to engage in a battle that could very well end in mutual annihilation, that Grimm was taking a horrible risk.

It wasn't the XO's fault that he had never fought upon Predator before.

It was time. His ship was in position, perhaps a mile and a bit more above the Auroran vessel.

“Sound maneuvers!” Grimm called.

The ship's bell began to ring in a rapid staccato, a last warning to the ship's company to secure safety lines before Predator went into battle.

Grimm felt a wolfish grin touch his mouth. He reached up to tighten the band of his peaked cap in preparation for the dive, and nodded slightly to one side. “Mister Kettle,” he said, “you may begin your dive.”

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