



Hope & Glory



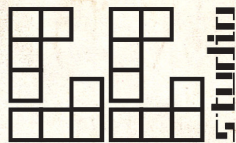
ABOVE THE
CLOUDS



Daide Mana



Hope & Glory



Above the Clouds

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Welcome to a new world...

On the 21st of October 1852, the citizens of London and Paris were awed at the sight of the western sky turning suddenly a strange shade of purple and red.

The first seismic shocks were felt all over the world in the following hours, and by the dawn of the 23rd of October, the giant waves hit the coasts of Europe. In the evening of the same day, while the tremors continued, catastrophic waves also hit the coasts of Asia. Whole cities, blasted by the earthquakes, were submerged by the sea. Millions of lives were lost.

Then the Black Rain began, washing the ruins and leaving behind a thick layer of ashes. Dark, impenetrable clouds hid the sun, and the Thirty Years Winter began.

In the Northern Hemisphere crops failed, snow-bound cities went up in flames as the populations rioted and the governments tried to find a solution, the means to survive.

One hundred years have passed now since the Catastrophe, and humanity has survived.

In the former colonial domains of Africa and South America. In the blasted plains of China. Among the remains of the Japanese archipelago. In Russian palaces sealed against the howling winds of the steppe. In the land that once was India. With sacrifice and ingenuity, with courage and hope, new nations have crawled back from the brink to claim the new world.

Science is a beacon to the future.

From the frozen wastes of Europe, where the mammoth roam, to the proud Zulu Nation of Africa, from the technological wonders of the Anglo-Indian Raj to the mist-shrouded shores of Lost America, these are the stories of a new, strange world.

Above the Clouds
by Davide Mana

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“Captain Yamagata, sir...”

Yamagata rubbed sleep out of his eyes and rolled out of his bunk. “What?” he asked, voice rough, lips chapped.

Young Midshipman Watanabe was there, prim and proper in her blue uniform. “Your presence is required on the deck, sir.”

He glanced at the chronometer. Two hours to his watch. Trouble. “I’m coming.”

There was a certain fatalism in Captain Yamagata’s spirit. Twenty days into its maiden voyage, the ‘Princess Himiko’ had so far met no problem of any kind. A new ship with a mostly inexperienced crew, they had visited Bombay and Tsaritsin, had braved the steel winds of the Russian plains and the diamond-sharp tops of the Himalayas, and were now on their way back home. The Princess Himiko had performed way above expectations, as had the crew. Not a single glitch in twenty days. He had known all along it could not last. He wrapped himself in his coat, set his cap on his short hair, and walked along the gangway, the young engineer hot on his heels. His steps were so heavy the thin grille of the floor flexed slightly, making his going bouncier than usual.

They left behind the officer quarters and followed the corridor past the wardroom and through the hatch to the command bridge of the

'Princess Himiko'. The third shift was manning the posts. Old Kuwata at the steering wheel, Taniguchi at the charts and system dials, and Nakajima sitting in the Captain's chair.

As Yamagata stepped on the bridge, murmuring a perfunctory "As you were," Lieutenant Nakajima stood and bowed. "We have a contact, sir." Yamagata scratched his beard, stifling a yawn. "A contact?"

The Lieutenant nodded, handing him a pair of binoculars.

"Ohara sighted it," he said. "He's on spotter duty down below." Yamagata grunted. Nakajima pointed with his white-gloved hand. "At eleven hours, sir."

Maybe it was nothing, Yamagata thought as he leaned into the bubble porthole. A Company privateer, maybe. The Company ships were everywhere these days. The young officers were inexperienced and on edge, as it was right. And yet, Kuwata was an old hand...

Yamagata looked outside. The Himiko was cruising about three hundred meters above a boiling sea of stormy clouds that blanketed the upper course of the Chang Jian, the Great Snowy Mountains a pale blue ghost to the west and the north. Lightning ran through the black and purple mass of humidity and dust that churned beneath the Himiko, like veins across the bruised hand of an old man. He could imagine the rumble of thunder.

He looked at eleven hours, and saw nothing.

With a snort, he put his eyes to the eyepieces and panned across the horizon, trying to get his bearings, shifting his perspective.

"Can you see it, sir?"

Yamagata was about to grunt a negative when a flash of light illuminated the cloud field, and he caught a glimpse of a shape. There was a black-against-black silhouette moving in the clouds. He adjusted the focus.

"Yes," he said slowly, "I can see it."

The curved line of the thing emerged from the clouds, like the back of a great whale seeking for breath. He almost expected a mighty explosion of water and steam to pour forth from its blow-hole.

But it had no blow-hole, of course. It was a ship, not a whale. A silver airship soaring at a mad angle.

With his thumb, he switched scale and superimposed a translucent rule on the vista. Zooming back, he was able spot the tail fin, before the ship sank again into the clouds. He checked his readings.

"This can't be," he said.

He handed the binoculars back to Nakajima, that in turn checked the reading. The Lieutenant opened his mouth, then closed it.

In the distance, accompanied by the play of lights of the storm brewing, the mysterious ship rose again to the surface, trailing thick tongues of mist. They could see the conical prow, the ribbed body, and then again a hint of tail.

"Must be over eight hundred feet long," Yamagata said.

"There's never been a ship like that," Taniguchi said.

The Captain glanced at the navigation officer. "Facts seem to contradict you, Lieutenant," he said.

He felt the need for a strong cup of tea.

Nakajima gestured for him to take his rightful seat. Yamagata nodded, and sat down.

"I'll take it from here," he said, signing the duty roster.

"Aye-aye, captain," Nakajima responded.

"Let's match speed and drop one hundred meters," Yamagata said.

Kuwata moved the lever without turning. "Let's try and get a better look at that monster."

His officers moved like clockwork. The alarm bell rang throughout the Himiko.

"It seems to be adrift," Watanabe said. She had taken position at the bubble porthole, the telephone to the down below crow's nest in her hand.

"Can you imagine the engines of a thing that big?" Taniguchi said.

Then Kuwata blurted out an obscenity, soon followed by Watanabe's gasp. The hysterical ringing of the closed circuit telephone signaled Ohara had seen it too.

"There is another!" Watanabe said. "There's two of them!"

2.

"Any idea of why ship number one is behaving like that?" Yamagata asked.

Kuwata scratched his black and gray beard. He stared at the shapes floating through the bruise-colored storm clouds. The second ship appeared to be identical to the first. A two-hundred-yard silver cigar, it floated idly at the top of the cloudy cover, like a log adrift in still water. But the first one kept bucking like a wild horse, going in and out of the clouds.

"A ballast problem?" Kuwata offered, and then shook his head.

"Yet I wonder what a ship like that might use as ballast."

"Water, probably," Watanabe said.

The old man at the rudder turned to her. "Why water?"

She shrugged. "Abundant, easy to replace, cheap."

Yamagata nodded. "And what do you make of the design?"

"Not Russian," Kuwata said. "Nor the Raj. Obviously not John Company."

Yamagata grunted. "And it can't be Taiping."

The Chinese Taiping Empire's ban on flying craft had been enforced for over fifty years. And Ezo had been keeping a keen eye on its Chinese neighbors. Yamagata placed a hand on the steersman's shoulder. "Let's approach ship number two," he said.

Kuwata squinted. "Approach?"

There was a smirk hovering on his lips. He and the captain had been through a lot of things.

"To the thirty-yards mark. Do a full circuit around their axis. I want to take a good look at this thing."

Kuwata grinned and rolled his head, cracking the kinks out of his neck. This was the man he had served under during the Chishima crisis. He pushed a big button and rang the battle-stations alarm.

"Intercept course in five, sir," he said.

"Then place us above them," the Captain ignored his pilot's grin, "match speed. Keep one hundred feet clear of their hull."

Then Yamagata turned. "Nakajima."

"Aye, sir."

"Assemble a boarding party."

Silence fell on the deck, broken only by Kuwata's chuckle.

"A boarding party?" Taniguchi cleared his voice. "Considering the risks, sir--" he started.

"Of course I am considering the risks, Lieutenant," Yamagata snapped.

He looked at each one of them in turn. "I am tired, gentlemen."

He moved to the side of his seat and ran his fingers on the arm-rest. "This long pointless cruise has tired me beyond belief. I am tired of dress uniforms and limp-wristed handshakes. Tired of the complicated ritual and the formalities. We have been on parade long enough, I think."

He looked up. "The Princess Himiko is an exploration ship, the point ship in Ezo's air fleet. We are facing something worth exploring. You want me to turn tail, and run... to whom? The Raj? The Russians? Asking their help in solving this mystery? Please, powerful empires, the Ezo Republic is too small and weak, the Princess Himiko is too small a ship..."

"No way," Kuwata rumbled.

Taniguchi did not seem convinced, but the others were nodding, a proud light in their eyes.

Yamagata took place on his chair with a tired sigh. "Mr. Kuwata, let's see how they like being approached. Mr. Nakajima, about that boarding party..."

"Five men, sir. They'll be ready in ten minutes."

Yamagata nodded. Through the metal floor, he felt his ship thrum, and smiled. Himiko was waking up, too, after these long weeks spent on an idle cruise.
The alarms sounded, and the ship came alive.

3.

Steadily, keeping at a respectful distance from the whale-like body of the unknown ship, the Himiko sunk into the clouds.

Kuwata groaned as the steering wheel tried to escape his grip. Temperamental lady, with all her petticoats to the wind, was Mistress Himiko. The light shifted from early morning to late afternoon in five heartbeats, and the sound of thunder caused the nacelle to vibrate.

Yamagata sat back, while Watanabe leaned into one of the bubble windows, her eyes straining to catch the full size of their target.

She maneuvered her slide rule and shook her head.

"Over one hundred feet of diameter. Closer to one hundred twenty."

"How does it stay afloat?" Taniguchi asked.

Kuwata cursed. "And look at that!"

The Himiko was slowly diving into a sea of mist, wind trying to grab its small gondola, lightning making the suspension cables sparkle. And in front of the ship, a huge propeller slowly turned in the haze, its blade as tall as the Ezo airship was long.

"Mr. Taniguchi," Kuwata said, guiding the ship lower and sideways, "here are your motors."

Watanabe ran to the fore windshield, her mouth hanging open.

"This is crazy," she said. "There must be four of them."

"Or maybe six, and we're lucky those things are obviously idling, or we'd be shredded like paper."

Then, as Kuwata maneuvered carefully, they banked and moved beneath the other ship's hull.

"Their gondola is integrated in the body of the ship," Watanabe said. "A bold design choice." Her voice dripped with admiration.

"Look at all those windows," Taniguchi pointed. "How many people are inside that monster?"

Yamagata coughed and turned. "We are about to learn. Mr. Taniguchi, hail the unknown vessel."

The kid grinned. "Aye-aye, sir!"

He sat at his post and flipped the switches for the external semaphore system. He ran the standard hailing recorded on the ship's master system: 'This is the Ezo Republic skyship Princess Himiko.'

Watanabe frowned. "What if they are unfamiliar with our system?"

"We'll be at least doing something," Kuwata said.

"Well, it's half an hour we are doing something," the woman replied.

The pilot nodded grimly.

"The good news is," Taniguchi said, "they have not yet shot us out of the sky." He leaned into his visor and clicked the standard salutation again. He waited, then dialed a repeat. And again. "The bad news is, they are ignoring our lights."

Yamagata picked the internal telephone. "What about that boarding party?"

"The men are ready," Nakajima replied. He sounded excited.

"I need to be on that ship," Watanabe said, taking a step forward.

"Sir."

Yamagata arched an eyebrow. The woman had never been so assertive in the twenty days they had shared on board.

"And you'll need somebody with some smarts," Kuwata said, motioning for Taniguchi to take his place. "I'll command the boarding party."

"What is this," Yamagata asked, "a mutiny?"

"It's common sense," Watanabe whispered, and then blushed.

"You said you are tired of playing skipper for a cruise yacht," Kuwata grinned. "Piracy has its rules."

4.

"I don't like this one bit," said Yamagata.

Kuwata grunted and shrugged into his fleece jacket. "The party needs a steersman, and Oda won't do, with his shoulder still out of order."

Yamagata snorted. "You are just coming off from eight hours on the bridge. You should be in your bunk, resting..."

"Eight boring hours in which nothing happened. I might as well have slept on my feet."

They reached the loading hatch. The other members of the team were already assembled there. Two men were mounting the harpoon gun on its sled.

"Gentlemen..."

Yamagata nodded to Midshipman Watanabe, wrapped in layers of warm clothes. Nakajima came forward. "The boarding party has been assembled, sir."

Doctor Jacques Merton was stretching and yawning shamelessly. "We finally get to play air pirates, eh?" he said.

"There might be persons in need of medical assistance," Nakajima explained apologetically.

Or bodies in need of an autopsy, Yamagata thought. "Yes, good thinking," he said.

He inspected the team, appreciating Nakajima's choice. Kuwata, the senior officer and chief pilot, was buckling up his utility belt. Then Watanabe, their junior engineer. The doctor shouldered his pack. The descendant of the French colony that the Catastrophe had trapped in Hokkaido in 1852, his mother was of Japanese stock. He was Furansujin, a proud member of a group that made up more than 20 percent of the Republic. Then the two younger officers on board, Midshipman Matsuda and Midshipman Koda, looking like college students. Koda was cradling a Flobert cannon in her arms. She was the only one carrying a gun.

"Take care with that toy," Yamagata said.

Koda smiled awkwardly. "Aye-aye, sir," she said.

"The harpoon is ready, sir."

Nakajima pointed. "Ohara spotted a series of hatches, along the beam of the ship. We are closing on the mizzen one, and we will aim the grapple ten feet from it, at the center of an aluminum plate."

Yamagata and Kuwata traded a glance. The pilot nodded. "Let's get moving." As the poop hatch was lowered, the noise of the motors joined the howling of the wind, and the temperature dropped.

"What a nice way to start the day," Merton mumbled.

The hatch stopped with a creak. Through the opening, they could see the maelstrom beneath them, and the back of the mysterious flying ship, directly below.

"What a monster," Kuwata whispered.

The gunners pushed the harpoon gun sled in position. Nakajima waited for his captain's nod, and then gave the order.

With a loud bang, the harpoon crossed the distance between the Himiko and the unknown ship, coils of cable trailing behind it. The spike hit the aluminum hull and pierced it, snapping open. A gunner pressed the pedal, and the winch came alive, tensioning the cable.

"We are set, sir."

Kuwata walked to the cable, touched it with his gloved hand, and then attached his harness to it, carabiners snapping.

"How are we supposed to come back up?" Merton asked.

Watanabe lifted her hand, and pointed the braking/climbing mechanism to him. The doctor smiled. They all had been through training.

Kuwata nodded, arranged the breather over his nose and mouth, and let himself drop along the line.

5.

Cold stabbed at his exposed skin as Kuwata landed on the aluminum surface, wind roaring in his ears, the distant rumble of the maelstrom thunders like the gods clearing their throat. The low, quiet vibration of the airships' body rose through his soles. Far in the distance he caught a glimpse of the other ship, a dark shape in the haze. He stepped aside and caught Watanabe as she touched down, and snapped a carabiner to her belt. She nodded and moved away, making room for Merton.

The doctor landed heavily, grunting in his mask, flexing his knees. The engineer caught his wrist and pulled him to the side, and connected her harness to his. Koda landed next, and finally Matsuda, the last of the line, attached his own line to the harpoon.

Kuwata looked up at the frail frame of the Himiko, hovering against the blue of the sky, the t-shape of the hull hanging beneath the fat cigar of the gas balloon. When he looked down, the size of the mysterious ship hit him with its full scale. It was like standing in a bright white field at the top of a hill. He could see the curve of the hull's sides, and yet it was hard to believe.

Keeping low, he advanced towards the porthole, his crew following him in single line, trailing the safety cable.

The hatch was closed, a simple convex porthole with a wheel mechanism.

He looked at Watanabe, and then grabbed the wheel.

Matsuda joined him in pushing, and finally the mechanism gave with an unpleasant metallic groan, and the porthole popped open, blowing hot air.

Kuwata looked down. A black pit disappeared into the depth of the ship, a simple stepladder bolted to one side.

The group reconfigured their marching order, and then Kuwata detached himself from the line and started climbing down, Koda hot on his heels, her airgun ready.

The pilot half-stepped, half-slid down the ladder, finally reaching a metal grille landing. It was like a small square balcony, a tall handrail running all around, and darkness everywhere. He lit up his torch, inspecting the premises. Above him, Koda hung upside down from the hatch, covering him with her gun.

"This place is dead," he said finally. "Stop playing monkey, kid, and signal the others to come down."

She vaulted nimbly and dropped by his side, removing her breather while waving her torch up the pit. "At least it's warm in here," she said. Soon they were crowding the small space. "Which way now?" Merton asked. There were two catwalks, stretching away in the darkness in opposite directions.

Kuwata opened his jacket and pointed. "The prow is that way."

The doctor arched his eyebrows. "And we are going towards the prow? I thought the plan was to go down."

"And I'm betting a way down is to be found that way, doctor," Kuwata replied.

Watanabe was scanning the dark space around them, where the light from the torches did not reach. It was like being in a cavern.

"This is totally metallic," she said, her voice hushed in awe. "They use some form of ballonets, I think..."

"A Spiess design," Kuwata said.

Watanabe nodded in agreement. "But this thing is huge!"

Merton looked at him. "German?"

Kuwata made a low grunt. "Come, let's try and find a way down."

He started along the gangway..

6.

Fifty steps along the catwalk, they reached another square platform. There was a passage above and one below, the walkway continuing on into the darkness.

"Down?" Merton asked.

"We need to reach the gondola," Watanabe said. "Check the controls, find out about the crew."

"Maybe it was caught in a storm, and ripped away from its airfield," Merton suggested.

Matsuda glanced at him. "Two ships at the same time?"

"Even when parked on an airfield," Kuwata said, "there's a watch stationed on an airship. Whatever the case, somebody must be on board."

A metallic clang caused them all to turn, the sound echoing in the darkness.

"What was that?"

Matsuda shook his head. "It came from somewhere aft."

Koda glanced at Kuwata. The pilot nodded. "We go down. Midshipman, you take up the rear."

"What do you think there might be in here with us?" Merton asked, looking down the passage. He made a face. "This place is dead, and it's been for a while."

Kuwata shrugged. "My guess? Some automatic system is running the ship. And I'd like to take a look at it. Watanabe-chan?"

Watanabe turned.

"You go first," he said.

She slipped her light in her utility belt and crouched down. She sat on the rim of the pit and then, with a sigh, started climbing down.

They heard her gasp.

"Watanabe!"

Koda was aiming down the passage. "There's light!" she said.

They all saw the yellow haze coming from the porthole.

"It's all right!" Watanabe called.

Kuwata was already halfway down. He landed in a closed corridor, an elliptic tube, with a rubber floor. Bright lamps sitting in small wire cages along the ceiling illuminated the passage.

"They came on when I touched down on the floor," Watanabe explained.

"And there's more."

She pointed to the wall. There were words impressed on a brass plate, with arrows. Kuwata squinted at them.

"It's German," she said.

"You understand the lingo?"

There were not many surviving German-speakers, but he knew there were a lot of technical books written in that dead language.

"Somewhat," she said. She passed her fingertips on the plate.

"Offiziersmesse," she said, pointing to the fore. "The Officer's wardroom." She turned. "And Blau Gas Kontrollraum," she pointed aft.

"Blue Gas control room."

Kuwata grimaced, but it was Merton, peeking down from the top hatch, that asked the question. "What is Blue Gas?"

Watanabe just shook her head.

Kuwata scratched his beard. The rest of the boarding party joined them, crowding the corridor. "Fine," he said finally. "Watanabe, you and Matsuda go and check this mysterious Blue Gas room. We keep going towards the Wardroom."

"And in case of need, give us a shout," Merton laughed.

Watanabe stared at him. "You are right, Doctor, you know..."

Merton frowned, but Kuwata cursed out loud.

"Care to share the news?" the Frenchman asked.

"Our voices. No distortion."

Koda and Matsuda went pale. The woman snapped the safety catch on her gun, locking it.

"This thing is not flying on helium," Kuwata whispered.

"The mysterious Blue Gas?" the doctor asked.

Watanabe shook her head. "Hydrogen," she said.

They looked around. Kuwata passed a hand along his chin. "We are inside a fire bomb eight hundred feet long."

7.

"Any signals from the ship?"

Nakajima shook his head. "The storm is probably interfering with the Marconi."

"Teaches us to trust Italian technology," Midshipman Maeda murmured. Captain Yamagata took a deep breath. Almost forty minutes without any communication, the unknown ship silently tugging at the line that connected it with the Himiko.

"Sir, I think we have a problem."

Yamagata looked up.

The other ship, the one they had sighted first, was coming through the boiling mass of the clouds again, like an enraged leviathan.

"It's getting closer," he said.

The pilot confirmed. "Yes, it's coming at us. It is riding a current, I don't think anyone's steering it."

"Only a madman would steer like that," Maeda said.

"We need to get out of its way," Yamagata said, standing. "And take the ship down below with us."

For the second time in less than one hour, alarms sounded onboard of the Ezo airship.

"And let's hope Kuwata sends us a signal."

8.

"Who would be so stupid to fill a ship this large with hydrogen?" Merton asked.

He let himself drop on the floor and steadied himself by placing a hand on Kuwata's shoulder. Then he looked around, in the dim light of the service lamps, and whistled between his teeth.

"Somebody in a hurry," Kuwata said.

They had explored briefly the stateroom, finding only empty lockers. The place had clearly never been used. Then they had followed a large duct down into the main living space of the airship. Now they stood there, Kuwata and Merton looking around with their mouths open, Koda keeping her weapon level.

The gondola of the airship was huge, big enough to contain the Himiko with its balloon deflated. It had probably been subdivided into small quarters, originally. Both on the floor and on the ceiling, the marks of where thin utility walls had been bolted were still visible. Now the gondola was one single open space. The air smelled of ether, and pipes the size of a man's wrist snaked on the floor. The yellow lamps were few and far between, and the whole space was bathed in an unhealthy yellow penumbra.

Through the portholes that ran along both sides of the structure, dark mist billowed, occasionally lit by a flash of lightning. The forward end of the structure housed a small, essential steering station.

"Look," Koda said.

The lights growing in intensity, they saw the center of the room was taken up entirely by a drum-like structure, a mighty cylinder with brass fixtures, into which the pipes fed. As they walked nearer, glass windows along the drum's perimeter lit up, casting a bluish light. Kuwata cursed under his breath.

Merton took a few steps towards the structure, undoing the buttons of his jacket.

9.

The Blue Gas chamber was a closet-like space with gauges and levers. All the dials were in the red.

'Verbraucht,' they read. "Exhausted," Watanabe translated.

There was a plaque, with the schematics of the gas circulation system.

"This is weird," Watanabe whispered.

"What?"

"This circuit here. Whatever the Blue Gas is, they used it as both fuel and ballast."

"Doesn't make much sense."

"Maybe," she said, musingly. "But it's interesting. We could use something like that."

"Maybe that's why ship number one acts so strangely," Matsuda said.

"Maybe they exhausted this Blue Gas, and lost their ballast." He groaned. "But then why is this ship not acting the same?"

Watanabe tapped on the plaque. "There's a double system. Blue Gas, and water, for ballast. They have a clever circuit that captures hull condensation to replenish the water tanks. Maybe that's what failed on ship number one."

The room had clearly been designed for a single operator. They opened their jackets in the hot air. Watanabe looked around, using her torch in the corners. "This place looks brand new," she said.

Matsuda ran his hand on one of the pipes. It felt cold through his glove.
“Not just this place.”

They had stopped along the way to check out two tube-like chambers connecting at right angles to the main corridor, left and right. Each housed ten cot-like sleeping places. Those rooms had looked new and untouched, too.

The metal clanging noise repeated itself, this time closer.

They exchanged a glance.

“There’s something still moving in here,” Matsuda said.

He pulled out his short sword.

“Let’s go find the others,” Watanabe said.

Another clang came from above, closer still.

“I think splitting the party was not a good idea,” Matsuda said, as they marched along the corridor.

10.

"Are they still alive?"

Merton waved a hand, and kept checking out the dials.

Kuwata stared at the young woman behind the thick glass door. She was very young, with blond hair and a skin as white as a ghost. She appeared to be asleep, standing up, her eyes closed, her features relaxed. She wore a white shift, like a plain nightgown. A band was wound around her left arm, a number of tubes disappearing beneath it. As the ship shuddered and rocked in the storm, she appeared to be floating gently in the fluid, tiny bubbles escaping from her fine straight nose.

She was one of twenty-four, twelve male and twelve female, each one asleep in his or her small chamber, each one young, and fair, and unblemished.

Well, twenty-three of them. One of the glasses had cracked, and the internal chamber was filled up to the fracture with a murky, dark, oily substance, in which the remains of a human body floated, a brown skull with thin blond hair plastered to the bone, and the shriveled remains of a body, wrapped up in a stained piece of linen. It had once been a man, based on simple mathematics. Part of the fluid inside the chamber had spilled out on the floor, leaving a dark trail on the face of the broken chamber. There was a large black stain where the pool had

dried up. Merton scratched at it with a small scalpel, and rubbed the residue between his fingers. It smelled chemical. "I'll need to analyze this, of course," he said. "But judging from what we can see, I'd say some kind of nutrient fluid."

One young man was dead, his companion were sleeping.

The chambers lined the outer perimeter of the drum-like machine that took up the airship's gondola. The mechanism produced a steady buzz and a rhythmic wheezing sound, like a bellows blowing once every two minutes.

In time with the tiny bubbles from the blond girl's nose.

Merton had dropped his jacket on the floor, and rolled up his shirt sleeves. He was running his fingers on the levers of what looked like a large control station, bolted by the side of the chambered drum. There was a plate, by the controls.

'Arche des Volk - III'.

"Any idea of how this thing works?"

The Frenchman shook his head.

Kuwata moved to the fore, eyeing the steering controls. "Let's see if we can find a way to communicate with the outside."

A shout sounded above them. Koda turned sharply, unlocking her gun.

//.

Lieutenant Matsuda parried one of the machine's steel pincers with his sword, and retreated. He was bleeding from a gash in his side, which made him limp as he retreated along the corridor. His assailant chimed like a clock, and advanced, pressing him. The man backed into the stateroom, hitting the metal table in the middle of the room, and skirting it.

"Matsuda-kun!" Watanabe shouted behind him. He cast a quick glance. She was sitting on the rim of the downward passage.

"Go!" he shouted back. He turned just in time to dodge another attack. He heard the steps of the engineer as she sped down the stepladder. He leaned on the inner hatch, sealing the passage behind her, and grimly studied the machine.

The thing had attacked them as they left the Blue Gas chamber and were retracing their steps down the corridor. It was a bunch of flexible tentacles, six feet long, attached to an egg-shaped metal body, the size of a ten-gallon keg. It swung into the corridor from one of the side passages. It clanged like an old grandfather clock chiming midnight, and instantly snapped at them with the claw-like end of one of its appendages.

Matsuda had pushed Watanabe out of the way, and parried using his sword. The thing had closed in and caught his side with another steel-tipped tentacle.

Now they stood face to face, Matsuda astride the locked hatch, the machine sitting on four coiled tentacles, two yards away. A fifth appendage had been disabled by Matsuda, by pushing his blade where the tentacle connected with the egg-shaped body. Now it hung limply on the floor, and the thing dragged it behind, like a tail. Three more feelers were waving in the air, like cobra snakes enchanted by an Indian fakir.

Feeling the sword slip from his sweaty grip, Matsuda wondered how much time he had left. He also wondered how the thing perceived its surroundings.

It had no eyes, no sensory organs. Blind as a bat, and yet dangerous. The mechanical octopus chimed again.

12.

Watanabe tumbled down the top hatch and landed with a grunt on the floor. Koda was at her side, aiming her gun up the stepladder.

"Matsuda," Watanabe panted. "He's holding it up there."

Kuwata was crouched by her side. "What is he holding?"

"A machine. Some sort of defense mechanism."

She stood and grimaced. "I'm all right," she said.

Only then did she notice the great brass machine, with its glass caskets and the blond people floating in them.

"Who are these people?" she breathed.

"Later," Kuwata said, urgently.

He climbed swiftly up the ladder, and punched the porthole. "Matsuda-kun!" he barked.

There was no response.

The traded glances.

"I think," Merton said, passing his forearm across his brow, "these are somebody's last hope."

He tapped the plate on the control panel. "Arche des Volk," he said, as Watanabe limped to his side. "An Ark of some kind."

"Ark of the nation," Watanabe translated, nodding. She leaned onto the control box, and scanned the tags on the commands.

“They are all blocked in position,” the doctor told her. He smiled sheepishly. “I tried pushing and pulling at random.”

“We have something more urgent, crew,” Kuwata barked. “What’s that thing up there? What happened to Matsuda?”

Above them, a rhythmic metal sound echoed in the passage.

13.

It used sound.

Matsuda braced himself, leaning against the bulwark, and slowly writhed out of his jacket. The side was ripped open and soaked in blood, the lining hanging out of the tearing.

The mechanical octopus still sat on its tentacles, three pincers clicking as they wove in the space between man and machine, chiming at regular intervals.

The thing used sound, just like a bat. The gong-like note of its chime as main carrier, possibly the clicking of its claws for fine-tuning.

No other explanation.

Breathing hard, the gash in his side on fire, Matsuda bundled his jacket. He was staring at the body of the machine, the white metal surface of the egg.

The machine chimed, its talons clicked.

He had been still and silent too long, Matsuda thought. The machine had lost his position, and something in its wiring forced it to keep the position. Why keep the position?

Because it was waiting for support.

Gritting his teeth, Matsuda tossed his jacket at the thing. Tentacles snapped, trying to catch it as it flew, and got entangled in the shredded garment.

With a furious scream, the man rushed at the machine, sword in both hands. Two more tentacles shot out at him, and he connected with the metal egg. He found a junction between two plates, and pushed his blade in deep.

The hilt hit the metal and he pushed down on the hilt, causing the blade to cut an arch inside the mechanism.

The claw holding his shoulder went limp, the machine staggered, and gave a discordant bell-sound. Then it rolled on the floor, and was still. Matsuda crashed on the ground.

Heart pounding in his ears, he started crawling towards the exit hatch.

14.

A long groan and a shudder ran through the hull of the Princess Himiko, the engines straining under the stress of trying to pull the unknown ship out of the way of its out-of-control twin. The torque was putting the light body of the ship to an unplanned test.

"We can't make it," Nakajima said.

Yamagata wished he had Kuwata at the wheel and Watanabe doing her calculations. "Invert the push," he said.

The steersman - Brunet, his name was - turned to look at him.

"Invert?"

"With our engines we can't pull her aside, but we can try and brake her, slowing her down."

"Buy time for Captain Kuwata and his squad," Nakajima said.

"Exactly. Still nothing on the Marconi?"

"No sir."

"Then we'll need to do it the old way."

He turned to Midshipman Maeda.

A sinister metallic hum shook the ship.

15.

"He'll live," Merton said, stuffing his gear back into his backpack. Matsuda had been laid on the table in the stateroom, where the doctor had cleaned and sutured his wounds. "He lost a lot of blood," the Furansujin went on. "But he's a strong boy."

Kuwata and Koda had rushed up the stepladder as soon as they had recognized the metal clang for what it was. A basic emergency signal. They had found Matsuda in a pool of his own blood, his hand holding the torch he had used to tap his message on the metal hatch.

"He'll need to rest," Merton said. "And carrying him back on board will be an interesting problem."

Kuwata turned. "Yes," he said. "As long as the kid's fine."

He had not been paying attention, as he and Koda were taking a good close look at the guardian machine.

"He's as fine as someone with a hole in his gut can be," the doctor replied.

The pilot beckoned for him to come close. "Come and tell me what you think," he said.

Koda moved to the side as the doctor approached the still cluster of metal tentacles. "Weird thing, what?"

Then he did a double take, and crouched down. There was a pool of sticky liquid on the floor, spreading slowly. He put his fingers in it and smelled it.

"Is it what I think?" Kuwata asked.

The doctor looked up. "The same stuff in the chambers downstairs," he said. "Or something very similar. Pass me my bag, will you?"

The ship shuddered suddenly, as if caught in a strong side current.

"The storm is getting worse," Merton said.

Kuwata made a face, shaking his head. "This is not a normal drift. We need to get going."

"Give me just a minute." The doctor selected a sturdy scalpel and started poking at the junctions between the metal plates in the egg-body of the machine.

"Aha!"

One of the plates popped open, revealing a lever flush with the egg body.

"Careful," Koda said.

Merton shrugged. There was a notch in which he pushed his finger, lifting up the small lever so that he may grip it. He pulled. With a loud click, the egg upper half turned clockwise and slid up, revealing the inner mechanism.

Koda gasped, turned, and bent double, retching.

Merton looked away from the mess that Matsuda's sword had done.

"Goodness!" he whispered.

The blade had slipped through the crack, severed a number of tubes, crashed a glass chamber and made a mess of what had obviously been a living brain.

16.

Lieutenant Watanabe checked the controls. A simple steering wheel, a set of levers to communicate maneuvers to the engineers. Everything seemed to be disconnected. Nothing worked. The cockpit looked incomplete, like it had been put together in a hurry, or stripped down for some reasons.

She favored the second hypothesis. The ship had been stripped of all inessentials, probably to reduce weight. She turned. And to make room for the big machine with the sleeping people.

They had also soldered shut the normal access doors, two on each side, effectively sealing the gondola.

She had tried to reach the Himiko, cranking the small Marconi device, but all she had been able to get was a hissing noise.

She walked back to the sleepers.

They were all pale, all fair-haired and fine-featured. There was an air of family about them. Like they were closely related.

Watanabe moved slowly around the drum, fingers brushing the brass and steel, careful not to stumble on the vine-like tangle of cables and tubes on the floor.

Halfway through her tour, her fingers brushed a plate, bolted to the side of the machine. The brass had tarnished, and she had to use her torch to shed some light on the words. Squinting at the angular lettering, her lips moving, Lieutenant Watanabe started translating the text.

17.

"The good news is, it's not human," Merton said. "Too small."

They had arranged a rig of sorts, using a length of rope, and now the Furansujin and Kuwata were lowering Matsuda's unconscious body down to the main chamber of the airship.

Koda had moved down, and was now helping Watanabe at the other end.

"You sure?"

"Reasonably. It's probably an ape's. A chimpanzee, probably."

They fed a little rope, careful not to make the going too rough.

"It makes sense, if you think about it," the doctor continued. "Good at climbing and at walking, smart, instinctive, with a strong sense of territory. A gorilla would probably work, too."

"I find it sick."

"Well, the preserved people down below are not themselves the epitome of good taste."

"What kind of people does that?" Kuwata asked.

Merton seemed about to shrug, then realized he couldn't do it while holding the rope. "If they are Germans," he said, "they had a good tradition of medical experimentation on brain transplants. People like Klein-Rogge, or before him, that guy, Fran..."

Right then, a baritone voice spoke, echoing in the emptiness of the airship. The words were in a strange, sharp-edged language neither of the men could understand. They froze, looking at each other. Kuwata cursed. "Let's make this quick."

18.

"It's an automatic gramophone recording," Watanabe explained as soon as Kuwata plopped down on the floor. "It started when the lights shifted from blue to white."

And indeed, now the chambers housing the sleeping bodies were brightly lit with a blinding white luminescence.

Merton ran to the control box.

"What does it say?" Kuwata asked.

The disembodied voice kept booming in the empty chamber, repeating its monologue. Watanabe shrugged. "It's not like reading it. I get one word out of three. Sounds like some kind of list of instructions. But come, take a look at this."

She led him to the plaque.

"This more or less tells the story," she said.

"Is that a sledgehammer?"

"Yes. The people that did this were part of a group, a society, called," she ran her fingers on the brass, "Reichshammerbund... the League of the Hammer of the Kingdom."

Kuwata grunted, urging her on.

"When the Daisanji hit their country, and the Long Winter came," Watanabe said, "the League acquired all the Zeppelins... this is the name of this kind of ship. Zeppelin was a pioneer in—"

"Go on."

"Sorry. They took them all, and on each they put an Ark. A selection of the finest among them. They taught them everything. The history of their race, and science, and art. Everything. And then they sent them to the skies, because the earth was in turmoil. So that in the future, at least one of these Arks would survive, and bring back their people, and their Kingdom."

"The finest among them," Kuwata said, scratching his beard. "And the finest among them were all young, blond and beautiful?"

The engineer stared.

"I don't like this one bit. The more I know these people, the more they scare me."

Merton called. "I think they are waking up!"

19.

Kuwata cursed in color. "Koda, cover the machine!"

"Aye-aye."

The young woman leveled her weapon at the brass and steel drum, warily eyeing the glowing chambers.

The pilot moved away from the Ark, dragging the doctor by an arm.

"Watanabe! We need to communicate with the Himiko. I want us out of here as fast as possible."

Before he could go on, Merton stopped him with a raised hand. "I know. I'll see Matsuda can be moved as easily as possible."

A plume of white steam escaped from the Ark. A horn started honking. Kuwata cursed again, and unsheathed his sword.

Merton shook his head. "They wake up after seventy years, and you greet them waving a blade?"

"Doctor, this are the sort of people that put monkey brains inside killer automatons. Uh?"

Watanabe turned sharply. "What?"

"Get me Yamagata on the line, officer!"

Inside the chambers, the armbands snapped open, releasing the tubes that had fed directly into the veins of the sleepers.

Watanabe hurriedly cranked the battery of the Marconi alive. The earphones gave her a storm of static.

"Does it work?"

"The storm outside..."

In the background, the recorded voice kept droning on, relentless.

"Make it work!"

The chambers were being drained, the fluid flushed out quickly.

"Himiko, this is Team One, please do you copy?"

More scratches and electric gibberish.

"Worst moment to test new technology," Kuwata said.

The chambers cracked open, the front swinging and sliding, a few pints of the oily fluid pouring on the floor. The men and women inside staggered out, coughing. Some fell to their knees, or crouched on the floor, retching, holding their bellies. Two of them, a man and a woman, straightened their shoulders and looked around. They were both taller than any of the members of the Ezo party. Their white linen shifts hung wetly to their bodies, and their blond hair dripped with preservation fluid. Both were of athletic build, and scanned the room with cold blue eyes.

Kuwata was reminded of Greek statues he had seen in a book, when he was in school. Greek gods.

The man took a step forward and said something in German, his voice croaking.

He coughed.

He repeated his question.

Behind him, the woman moved around, comforting the other sleepers, whispering words, exchanging intimate touches. Some of them were listening to the disembodied voice from the gramophone, and nodding. Others appeared to be scared, disoriented.

Kuwata shuddered at their strange behavior. The hugging and touching felt sick to him, as sick as much of what they had discovered so far.

The man fixed his icy stare on him. "You are Nihonjin."

Kuwata arched an eyebrow. "Perfect pronunciation," he said, with a nod. He bowed stiffly. "I am Captain Kuwata Tetsuro, of the skyship Princess Himiko. We represent the Navy of the Republic of Ezo."

The blond giant made the smallest of shrugs. "I don't know this Republic you speak of," he said, dismissively. He cast a glance at Merton. "But I see you allow half-breeds among you."

The doctor's eyes widened. Never had anybody used the expression half-breed to describe him. Not the citizens of the Republic, not the Anglo-Indians, nor the Russians.

He straightened. "Doctor Jacques Seichiro Merton," he introduced himself, stiffly. "I am the medical officer on the Himiko."

Before Kuwata could say anything, the blond woman shouted, and the rest of the sleepers ran to her. They were chattering in excited tones, standing around the broken chamber. Two of them forced the pierced door open, and the floor was flooded with black, foul-smelling liquid. The remains of the dead sleeper crashed on the floor with a loud, unpleasant sound.

In three long strides, the woman was facing Kuwata, her face contorted in anger. "What have you done to Heimdahll?"

Kuwata took a step back. "The chamber was ruptured," he said. "It was already like this when we boarded you."

He realized it did not sound that good.

A mighty flash illuminated the interior of the gondola, casting cruel shadows on the faces of the sleepers. The storm outside was getting rougher.

"You have killed one of ours, you stupid dirty apes!" the woman hissed. "Look at that body," Merton said, stepping forward. "Your friend has been dead for decades!"

"Silence," the giant said. He placed a hand on Merton's breastbone and pushed him back, sending him splashing into the foul pool.

"You attacked us!" the woman said, taking a step forward to come closer to Kuwata. "You boarded us and killed one of us!"

"Your ship is adrift in a storm," Kuwata said, holding his ground. He watched as Watanabe helped the doctor up. She shook her head. No contact on the Marconi. "We are a rescue party."

The blond woman was not listening. "You killed our brother Heimdahll! He was worth ten thousand of you... you subhumans! You apes!" She turned to the blond giant. "Kill him!" she said.

The giant grinned and moved against Kuwata, his big hands raised, a wild smile on his regular features. There was a dull thud and a cross of vulcanized rubber, one foot wide, slammed in the chest of the blond man, winding him and pushing him back. The man rolled on the floor. Grim-faced, Koda reloaded her Flobert.

The sleepers moved like one, converging on the boarding team, a low growl coming from their throats, but the giant stopped them with a barked order. He stood, massaging his chest, and picked up the blackjack slug, weighing the rubber cross in his hand.

"This is a nonlethal weapon," he said. "Why?"

Kuwata groaned. "Because we are a rescue party." He stared at the man. "And because sometimes the pain is enough."

The blond giant smirked. "Pain is for the weak. Why not kill your enemies?"

"What enemies?"

The man and the woman exchanged a look.

"The world is much changed," he said, looking down at the rubber slug in his hands. "When we took to the sky, the world was at war. For food, for heath, for fuel. Man against man. Man against Nature."

Kuwata shook his head, and sighed, sheathing his sword. "It's been a century," he said wearily. "A lot of things changed."

The blond giant threw the cross slug at Koda, catching her by surprise, and then lunged at Kuwata. The rest of the sleepers cheered and were on them, hands stretched like claws, a homicidal light in their eyes.

A shout of release. Like this was what they had dreamed of while asleep in their glass coffins.

20.

The rubber slug from the Flobert hit one of the women in the face, causing her to fall on her back. Her face a mask of blood, she shuddered and was still. The charge stopped.

"This is a nonlethal weapon," Koda said, chambering another slug, "but only if I want to."

The Germans stood back. They were no longer acting like reasonable people, but rather like animals, like a pack of wild beasts that had scented blood but were still shy of the weapons of their intended prey. They deigned their fallen companion of little more than a glance. They were beyond human feelings, Kuwata thought, and yet creatures of instinct. They had used words like subhumans and apes, but they were the ones acting like animals. They acted as if the loss of their companion had driven them crazy, pushing them back to the state of cavemen.

The Germans spread, forming a circle around Kuwata and his team. Koda moved her weapon in an arch, trying to keep them all at bay. Kuwata and Watanabe had their short swords at hand.

Merton crouched down, checking Matsuda's conditions. He patted his face lightly. The boy opened his eyes. "What...?"

The doctor shook his head.

"Can he do it?" Kuwata asked, his eyes in the blue eyes of the blond giant facing him.

"I guess he will have to," Merton replied, helping Matsuda to his feet. The boy looked at the growling horde of blond men, but again the doctor shook his head, silencing his questions.

There was a slow chanting rising from the Germans. A single word, repeated obsessively, rhythmically, like a prayer.

Not even the beastmen in the icy wastes, Kuwata thought. "What are they saying?"

"Schlagen," Watanabe said. "Kill."

The boarding party retreated slowly to the stepladder leading to the upward hatch. The blond people pressed them, getting closer.

"You go up, I hold them," Koda said.

"The doctor and Matsuda go up, we hold them," Kuwata corrected her.

"Then Watanabe, then you."

"But..."

The blond giant was opening and closing his hands, his eyes fixed in Kuwata's. He shot forward. Kuwata's blade flashed, drawing a long red line across the man's palm. The sight of blood drove the Germans wild. They surged on, shouting their war cry at the top of their lungs.

21.

Midshipman Maeda landed on top of the unknown ship with a fiery curse. He had only his big mouth to blame, he thought. The wind tried to snatch at his cap and he had to squint to get his bearings.

He snapped his harness carabiner to the line the boarding party had laid between the harpoon and the hatch. Then, trying to keep the Flobert gun from hindering his already clumsy movements, he started crawling along the lines, covering the ten yards that separated him from whatever was inside this big silver flying leviathan.

Blame your big mouth, he kept repeating to himself.

He looked up, the monstrous shadow of the incoming ship looming larger by the minute.

22.

Snarling, the mad colossus grabbed Kuwata by the throat, bodily lifting him off the floor. The old pilot turned the blade in his hand, and stabbed him beneath the arm, the short wakizashi reaching the heart and putting an end to his life. The German fell back, the blade stuck in his rib cage.

A second assailant was upon Kuwata. The Japanese staggered back, stumbled on one of the ubiquitous cables and fell.

A salvo of rubber slugs pushed back the horde.

Kuwata looked up.

Koda and Maeda were holding the hatchway, each brandishing a Flobert gun. "We have to hurry, sir!" the newcomer shouted.

"Really?" Kuwata grinned, kicking back one of the women.

Watanabe helped him up.

Merton was already halfway up, Matsuda riding on his back.

Maeda pulled a rocket gun from his belt and handed it to Kuwata.

"Bad idea," the pilot said. "Let's go."

23.

They had to fight every step up the ladder, kicking back the incoming wild men.

"Whatever got into them?" asked Kuwata, slamming the porthole shut. They were back in the officers wardroom. Shouts and screams came from down below, muffled by the metal hatch.

Merton shrugged.

"Mr. Kuwata, sir," Maeda panted, "we have to hurry, sir."

Watanabe nodded. "They will come at us soon, using another passage."

"No," Maeda shook his head. "Captain Yamagata, sir, he says..."

Kuwata placed a hand on the kid's shoulder. "Take a breath."

"No time. Collision course. Ship one, incoming."

Kuwata cursed.

"Let's get out of this place," he said. "Now!"

24.

They scrambled along the gangways, Maeda leading them, Kuwata by his side, then Merton helping the limping Matsuda, Watanabe and Koda picking up the rear.

The great black cavern of the Zeppelin body was alive with shouts, screams, sound of steps on metallic walkways.

Kuwata kept urging them on, and soon they were back on the small platform.

The whole structure was vibrating, the rhythm of incoming paces shaking it and causing the bolts to squeal.

"Doctor, you go up with Matsuda."

Merton knew when it was the moment to keep his mouth shut. He handed his sword to Kuwata, and then helped the wounded man to the stepladder. They started the laborious feat of climbing out of the ship.

"Watanabe, you and Koda hold the aft gangway, I'll hold the fore with Maeda."

He slapped the kid on the shoulder. "Finally some action, eh, Midshipman?"

The lost stare of panic of the young man made Kuwata laugh aloud. He would pull these kids out of this trap, he said to himself, if it was the last thing he did.

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26.

Watanabe and Koda stood shoulder to shoulder.

"You keep them at a distance while I reload," Koda said.

Watanabe chuckled.

"What?"

"I was not bored at all, you know? Playing diplomat."

They paused for a moment, then cracked up laughing.

Behind them, Maeda wondered what the women found so funny in this deadly mess.

Then the Germans were upon them, and there was no more time for thinking.

27.

The distance caused it to look slow, and lumbering, but Yamagata had been an airman since he was fifteen. He knew that the airship Number One was actually hurling at them at no less than five knots.

Whatever accident made it hop up and down like a rocking horse had now impressed a rolling motion to the great white hull, its large idling motors moving like a seesaw.

"What are they waiting for?" Nakajima grumbled.

Yamagata checked the chronometers.

"Five minutes," Nakajima said, reading his mind.

"Go down to the hook. I want you on the platform."

"Yessir!"

Nakajima was halfway through the hatchway when the steersman cried out, and the internal telephone started ringing.

"They are coming out!"

28.

The doctor came out first, helping a wounded man Lieutenant Nakajima recognized as Matsuda. Then Watanabe, her hair in the wind. Through the binoculars Nakajima saw none of them was wearing a breather mask.

Then Maeda, his blue jacket ripped, one sleeve missing. Then, squeezing together through the narrow opening, Kuwata and Koda. They fell out of the hatch and the woman rolled along the curve of the hull, Kuwata stretching to catch her. He pushed his blade between two aluminum plates to anchor himself, and grasped her by the wrist. They remained like that, she dangling over the abyss, her hand still gripping the strap of her gun, he bending his muscles to bring her closer, to safety.

Merton and Matsuda were already by the harpoon, connecting their harness to the line.

This would be a close thing.

"As soon as they are all on the line," Nakajima said to the gunner, "we detach the harpoon and get the winch running."

Watanabe and Maeda joined the doctor.

"Who are those?"

There were men and women, half naked, coming from the other top hatches of the ship.

"We'll never be able to lift them all," the gunner said.

Then Kuwata threw his broken sword at one of them, causing him to roll down the side of the ship and disappear in the clouds, his scream lost in the howling of the wind.

"We are not lifting them up," Nakajima said.

Then Kuwata and Koda were together with the others.

Lieutenant Nakajima shouted both in the telephone and at the gun crew. "Go!"

29.

There was a sound, that rent the air, overwhelming every other sound. Gone were the rumble of the storm, the roar of the engines of the Himiko fighting against the howling of the wind.

Gone were the screams of the blond men and women as they spilled through the porthole, madness in their blue eyes.

Gone were the barked orders of Kuwata as he urged his band to hang on for dear life to the line from the Ezo airship.

There was only a long, agonizing screech of metal against metal as the two mighty airships collided and meshed into each other, the aluminum plates of their hulls buckling and crumpling like paper.

The two ships met almost head on, the one they had called Number One rising high and then coming down on top of the prow of Number Two, the glasses in its gondola shattering in a cloud of sharp shards.

One motor detached itself from its pylon and fell to the earth, disappearing in the churning maelstrom.

The lifeline snapped like a whip as the Himiko dropped its ballast and surged in the sky, away from the slow-motion wreck beneath.

The men and the women in the boarding party held on to the line, praying the carabiners and the harnesses would hold.

Hands gripped Watanabe's angle.

The woman screamed and looked down into the rabid eyes of the Reichshammerbund survivor, climbing up her leg. She kicked him in the face, but he only grinned. Then, with a hollow thump, Koda's Flobert gun fired its last slug, hitting him between the neck and the shoulder.

Watanabe watched him fall back towards the wreck of the Zeppelin, a surprised expression on his face.

Then the German ships erupted in an inferno of flames and smoldering debris, and the falling man was engulfed, and disappeared forever.

30.

"I wonder what the Chinese will make of the rain of debris," Kuwata said.

"They'll have a hard time, fitting it with their religion," Watanabe replied, a mischievous grin brightening her tired features.

Captain Yamagata shook his head. "Such a young woman, and already so cynical." He turned to Kuwata. "You have a bad influence on my officers."

Kuwata was too spent to reply. He just shrugged, and grunted.

They sat on the two lower bunks of Kuwata's cabin, and shared a cup of o-sake. Merton placed the bottle back on the electric heater, and raised his cup. "To those poor bastards," he said.

"Who," Watanabe asked, "the Chinese down below, or those madmen?"

The doctor finished his sake before he answered. "Both," he said.

"But why did they react like that?"

It was the doctor's turn for shrugging. "I don't know. In my opinion," he leaned back, staring at the ceiling, "the human brain's a very delicate piece of machinery. And keeping a delicate piece of machinery in storage for so many years..."

Watanabe nodded. "Makes the machinery inefficient."

Kuwata grunted. "People that put monkey brains in mechanical bodies," he said, picking up the bottle, "had their machinery out of order well before they were put in storage."

There was a knock, and Nakajima leaned in.

"Captain Yamagata, sir. The men are all at their posts, and we are on course for Asahikawa."

Yamagata nodded. "Fine."

"Sir, the men would certainly appreciate a short speech from you."

Yamagata sighed as he stood. "Let's go give the men a short speech, then. Watanabe-chan. Gentlemen..."

Kuwata, Merton and Watanabe sat in silence for one minute, listening to the reassuring drone of the motors of the Himiko.

"That was Ark number three, you know," Watanabe said suddenly.

Kuwata nodded.

"You think there might still be a ship full of blond madmen out there?"

Merton asked.

"Maybe."

"Maybe the other ship was lost and exploded too," Merton said.

"Or maybe landed somewhere, and they are building their Reich out in the badlands," Kuwata replied.

"People that damaged can't build anything," Merton said.

Kuwata looked at the bottom of his empty cup. "No, they can't," he said. "But I bet they are pretty good at destroying."

At last...

Above the Clouds is a story set in the universe of “Hope & Glory”, a game setting developed for the Savage Worlds rules.

The “Hope & Glory” universe exists for the game and for the gamers, and what follows is a roundup of gaming information for those readers that would like to start playing straight away. We hope the readers not (yet?) interested in gaming will find the additional informations on the story background interesting.

Thanks for reading, and have fun!

Flobert Gun

.. is actually a misnomer, derived from the original “Flobert guns” used for gallery and indoor shooting, imported by the French in Ezo in 1850. Those Flobert guns were percussion weapons, while the guns carried today by the Ezo troops on their airships are basically big caliber, high compression airguns. They can fire a variety of ammo (described below), which aren’t included in the weapon but must be bought separately.

The gun has the shape of a 6-ft. tube, with a rifle-like stock and a grip. Flobert guns can be single-shot or be fitted with a 5-shot magazine. Beyond short range, the gun is considered inaccurate.

WEAPON	RANGE	DMG	ROF	COST	SHOTS	MIN STR	NOTES
Flobert Gun	4/8/16	See Notes	1	500/ 300*	5/1	d6	Special Ammo

Special Ammo

- **Baton Rounds:** Heavy rubber projectiles, cross-shaped, designed for crowd control and non-lethal combat. They can stun an adversary, or incapacitate him, dealing 3d8 AP 2 damage, which is only temporary (wears off in 1d4 hours). A highly-skilled marksman can use this type of ammo to inflict lethal damage. 10 \$/shot
- **Net Rounds:** A square silk net, with lead weights at the corners. Used to trap adversaries. Consider it the entangle Power, using the Shooting roll as arcane skill. 100 \$/shot
- **Paint Rounds:** A thin canister of paint, used to mark prospect targets (+2 to artillery rolls against a marked target) or to blind enemy vehicles (consider it a Trick, using Shooting versus Driving). 20 \$/Shot
- **Smoke Grenade:** A canister containing a chemical preparation that expands into a thick cloud of smoke, with the size of Large Burst Template. In the template the visibility is Pitch Darkness, and it blocks the line of fire. It lasts 3d6 rounds on the battlefield. 50 \$/ Shot

- **Nerve Gas:** A canister containing a poisonous gas that can induce paralysis, breath difficulties and seizures. The gas occupies a Medium Burst Template, and is considered a Lethal (-2) Poison. It lasts for 1d4+2 rounds. 300 \$/Shot

The Reichshammerbund and the Arks

The Reichshammerbund (Society of the Empire's Hammer) was a "back to the roots" movement that, formed in the early decades of 19th century, became prominent in Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire after the Catastrophe.

Based on a mix of rationalized folklore, sui generis biological theories and a totalitarian world-view, the Society preached the coming of Ragnarok, and the Catastrophe was interpreted by many as proof that the Society had been right all along.

In the chaos of the Thirty Years Winter, the Reichshammerbund developed its plan for the survival of the German people: they built a number of flying Arks, using advanced Zeppelin airships. Each Ark carried a core population of 24 "perfect" Germans (12 males and 12 females) as selected by the Society to become the founders of a new Reich. The chosen individuals were placed in suspended animation thanks to a mix of chemicals. On the ships were also placed selections of seeds, tools, and concise reference libraries.

Before entering the suspension chambers, the chosen individuals were fully indoctrinated with the basic tenets of the Reichshammerbund, and underwent intensive physical training.

The exact number of Arks launched by the Reichshammerbund is unknown.

Waking up From an Ark

Suspension chambers are prone to malfunction.

The malfunction can be simulated by using a deck of card. If any red card is drawn, the chamber works fine and the individual survives. With a black card, there are troubles, as described below.

Deuce to Five: Malfunction causes minor physical damage. In gaming terms, the character wakes up with a Minor Hindrance, of physical nature (for example a light paralysis to a leg, as per the *Lame Hindrance*).

Six to Ten: As above, but the damage is more serious, causing a Major Hindrance of physical nature, like Blind or One Arm.

Jack: The person suffers from acute paranoia, consider it a Major Delusion.

Queen: The character suffers from paranoia, as above, plus from epileptic fits, which can appear in every stressful situation (GM's fit). In this case the character must roll on Vigor (-2) or be automatically Exhausted for 1d4 hours. With a 1 on the Vigor die, regardless of the Wild Die, he also suffers a Wound.

King: The character suffers from paranoia, as above, plus violent fits (consider him having both the Bloodthirsty Hindrance and the Berserk Edge).

Ace: The individual dies during the suspension period.

Joker: The chamber functions, but the lock mechanism fails; the individual is perfectly healthy, but drowns before he can be extracted from the chamber, unless someone saves him very quickly, with a Dramatic Task based on Repair and/or Healing (-2) and/or Lockpicking (-4).

Reichshammerbund Übermensch

These individuals were chosen (or possibly selectively bred) to be the perfect specimens of a supposed "master race", and trained for survival in the post-apocalyptic world. They are uniformly tall, blond and athletic, and they are all trained fighters in hand-to-hand combat.

They are the end product of a totalitarian, racist mindset, the closest thing, in the world of Hope & Glory, to Nazis.

Straight out of their suspension chambers they wear a simple, chiton-like white tunic, and have no weapons or tools.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d8, Spirit d8, Strength d10, Vigor d10

Skills: Fighting d8, Intimidation d8, Notice d6, Shooting d8, Throwing d8.

Edges: Attractive, Brawler, Brawny, Combat Reflexes, Elan.

Hindrances: Arrogant, Clueless.

Charisma: +2; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 6; **Toughness:** 8

Special Abilities

- **Perfect Human:** Über Germans represent, in a distorted way, the apogee of human being. Or, at least, this is what they think. Every Über German receives an additional Bennie, regardless of being an Extra or a Wild Card.

Zeppelin Octopus

Information is sketchy about this biomechanical creature used by the ancient Reichshammerbund people to maintain the Arks.

The Octopus has an egg-shaped body (4-feet high, 3 feet maximum diameter) with a metal carapace. Eight metal tentacles extend from the bottom of the egg, each topped with a set of pincers or (sometimes) with multi-function tools.

The Octopuses are powered by a clockwork system, and are basically blind; they can perceive their surroundings through a sonar-like system (Perception D6).

Attributes: Agility d6, Smarts d4(A), Spirit d6, Strength d8, Vigor d8

Skills: Fighting d6, Notice d6.

Pace: 4; **Parry:** 5; **Toughness:** 8(2)

Special Abilities

- **Armor +2:** Metal shell.
- **Construct:** +2 to recover from being Shaken; no additional damage from called shots; constructs do not suffer from poison or disease.
- **Crawler:** Octopi cannot run.
- **No Sight:** The Octopi are powered by a clockwork system, and are basically blind; they can perceive their surroundings through a sonar-like system (so, they ignore Visibility modifiers, but players can find clever way to mess up their sonar-sense).
- **Repair Routines:** The Octopus is made to keep operative the airship, so it has Repair d8, but only limited to fix the ship's apparati.
- **Tentacles:** Str+d4. Reach 2. Octopi use two tentacles to move, and can attack with up to six tentacles per round without any modifier. Tentacles can be hit with a Called Shot (-2) and have Toughness 5(1).
- **Weakness (Brain):** The general functions of the Octopus are granted by a trained chimpanzee brain, kept in a glass jar inside the machine. It can be hit with a Called Shot (-4) and has Toughness 6(1).

Airships

Ezo Republic “Princess Himiko”

The product of Japanese engineering and old French design, The Princess Himiko is a typical Ezo design: a small, fast, highly mobile airship featuring a wood and metal gondola hanging from a helium-filled balloon. While registered as an “exploration ship”, the Princess Himiko is heavily armed for a ship of its class.

The ship carries fifteen men.

Operational Ceiling: 15.000 feet.

Propulsion: Two Shinden compressed steam engines, positioned on long struts aft of the gondola.

VEHICLE	ACC/ TS	TOUGH	CREW	COST	NOTES
P r i n c e s s Himiko	5/20	9(2)	5+10	Military	Climb -2

Weapon: 20 mm Gatling Gun (x4), forward Cannon, Harpoon-Cannons (mobile).

WEAPON	RANGE	DAMAGE	ROF	COST	SHOTS	NOTES
Cannon	50/100/20	3d8+1	1	Military	10	AP 4, Heavy Weapon
Gatling Gun (20mm)	24/48/96	3d8	3	Military	100	AP 2, Heavy Weapon
Harpoon Cannon	20/40/80	3d6	1	Military	1	AP 1, Heavy Weapon, Used to pull

Reichshammerbund Arks

The Reichshammerbund Ark design is based on a standard Zeppelin design. It has an aluminum body in the shape of an elongated cigar, 840 feet long and 100 feet in diameter, and the gondola is integrated in the body of the vessel.

Buoyancy is achieved thanks to internal chambers ("ballonets") filled with highly flammable hydrogen.

The Arks use Blau Gas (a form of liquid, refined naphtha) both as fuel and as ballast. Blau Gas has the highest specific energy of any other flammable gas.

The Arks are fully automated, and carry one or two Zeppelin Octopuses (see) for maintenance and security.

The full complement of an airship of this class would be 40 men, but the only humans on board are the 24 Sleepers.

Operational Ceiling: 30.000 feet

Propulsion: 4 Benz Blau Gas (internal combustion) engines

VEHICLE	ACC	TOUGH	CREW	COST	NOTES
Reichshammerbund Ark	5/20	13(2)	0+24	Military	Climb -2

Afterword - Not Last Year's Steampunk

The core concepts of this story were developed in 2014, as a short demo scenario for the Savage Worlds RPG. Called "The Snowglobe Caper", it was based on what, at the time, was just an elevator pitch and a notebook filled with notes, and a working title.

What I wanted was a different sort of steampunk/steampulp world, an exciting and diverse gaming world for the players to explore. Something that could be described as "not last year's steampunk".

In the end, that demo game was never played - and the story slowly morphed into "Glass Houses", the first story, and the first published bit of the "Hope & Glory" universe.

I hope you had as much fun reading it as I had writing it.

And talking about writing - this is not a one-man-show (even if it maybe started like one), and there's a few people I need to thank.

I am tremendously indebted to the graphical artists currently at work on the project, Angelo Montanini and Alberto Bontempi, whose vision gave body and color to what were only words on a screen. Without Angelo and Alberto's contribution, this project would be going nowhere.

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Finally, a tip of the hat to the GGStudio team: Matteo Ceresa and Luca Basile, and of course our fearless leader, Gionata dal Farra.

Davide Mana

Asti, Italy

January 2017

About the Author

Davide Mana was born in Turin, Italy, 1967. He studied science in Turin, London, Bonn, Urbino. He got a BSc and a PhD in Geology. He served in the Air Force.

Davide has been a call center operator, language teacher, scarecrow, university researcher, freelance researcher, post-doc course teacher, translator, author, content crafter, art show coordinator, editor, lecturer, game designer, fantasy writer, teacher of Taoist Philosophy, book reviewer, web designer, bicycle repairman.

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Davide has been writing – both for the fiction and gaming markets – since the mid '90s, and his works have been featured in a number of fiction anthologies and gaming books.

In his spare time he listens to music, plays at tabletop roleplaying games, cooks and watches old movies. He's currently waiting for the dealer to deal him the next hand of cards.

He blogs – about history, adventure, literature – at the **Karavansara Blog**

