

## Orphans of the Celestial Sea, by Mark Fenger

What readers are saying about Orphans of the Celestial Sea:

" ARG! You swine! I must know what happens next! Great opening chapter. If you can sustain this pace, you have an absolute winner.

Merchant airships? Fog? Draggers? Bell codes? Kid's Tower? Wow, so many hints: you really have a whole world ready for us to explore - can't wait." – Adam X

"I am hooked. Too much violence in the first chapter would have turned me off, but you kept it real, which can sometimes be tricky in a Fiction book :)

I want to know what happens next, which I consider to be the basis of a good book, the characters and the epidemic itself intrigues me."

Well done all round." – James Murray

"This was fantastic. I absolutely love the ideas behind it, and the use of accented dialogue was superb. A lot of people can't pull that off but you did it well. Awesome how you combine aspects of steampunk, fantasy, and zombies." C.H.

"Nice cliffhanger. I started off thinking, "Okay, I'll just read the first chapter before bed," and looks like I'm going to be up later reading the next one." Katrina Forest

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## Orphans of the Celestial Sea Episode 1: Escape from Milton

By Mark Fenger  
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Episode 1  
Chapter 1

The Mist shimmered and shone like hungry moonlight as it left the forest and crossed into late-afternoon sunlight. It crept up the hillside like a living thing, long tendrils reaching ahead of the seething mass, dragging it toward the town of Milton.

Tom Cain watched, lost in fascination. He'd seen Mist before, but not like this one. Mist generally avoided sunlight and rarely had the strength to pull itself uphill so fast.

His reverie was broken by the second bell. The code was the same in every port-of-call he'd visited, single ring for Mist spotted, second for approaching town. He turned and headed at a leisurely pace for the nearest tower. The locals had mostly scattered to the protective havens, but Tom had seen enough Mists in his travels to know he could outrun the danger if he had to.

So long as they didn't ring the third bell.

"Hey, boy! Headin' for a tower already? What are yeh, a sissy townie?" Airman Oleg appeared between a row of ramshackle wood and tin buildings on the outskirts of Milton, followed by his friend Giles. Tom noted they were both walking just as fast as him toward the tower.

Tom grinned back, Oleg was always ribbing the junior crew. "Just takin' a stroll, Airman. Curiously we seem to be headed in the same direction."

Oleg and Giles matched Tom's stride. They were easily the two biggest crewmen on the merchant airship Myrmidon. Tom matched them in height, but he appeared reedlike next to their broad frames. Oleg was big and hard while Giles ran to fat around the middle.

"See that Giles? He shows proper respect. How come you never address me as 'sir' or 'Airman'."

Giles snorted. "Cuz yer a pompous ass, and you still owe me twenty guilder."

"Right, right. I does owe you, doesn't I?" Oleg laughed. "Well, you keep remindin' me, I'll keep on ignorin' you, and the world goes round, right laddie-buck?" He gave Tom a sharp jab in the shoulder.

Tom grunted noncommittally, and the three merchant marines continued to play brave, each pretending to walk more slowly than the others.

The distant sound of maniacal laughter stopped them cold. They listened intently to the wind for a minute.

"T'weren't nothin'," said Giles, but his voice crept up an octave, betraying his nerves.

Oleg nodded. "Yeah, they'd ring a third bell if it was Draggers."

>ding< >ding< >ding< On cue, the third bell sounded.

"Shouldn'ta spoke Oleg... you knows it's bad luck," muttered Giles.

The three hastened their pace, each trying to get ahead of the others while appearing nonchalant.

They rounded the corner to the tower Tom had spotted and he saw the legs were ringed with red and white stripes. "Kids tower."

Oleg grunted and hastened his pace. "If you be suggesting we find someplace else you're on your own!"

Tom shrugged. "I'm allowed up there, still eighteen for a few more weeks."

"I've heard tell of lads your age bein' infected by Mist."

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Tom ran the last few steps to the ropeladder. "Yeah," he said, as he swung on and climbed like a monkey, "rarely, but the law's the law."

Oleg and Giles paused for a moment, obviously contemplating their punishment if caught. Another staccato howl of laughter cut through the air like a bullet. Oleg was up the first five rungs in a bound, and Giles wasn't far behind.

Fifty feet up, Tom hauled himself through the hatch and rolled on to the floor of the tower, a crude, roofless room about ten feet on a side, with walls up to his ribcage. Three teenage girls were already up there. Two of them huddled together in a corner, and the third held a revolver and had a look on her face like she wished he was a Dragger, just so she could kill something.

Oleg and Giles weren't far behind. "Draggers, onna ladder!" panted Giles.

Tom glanced through the hatch and saw a half-dozen of them climbing. In spite of dirty faces, matted hair, and torn clothing, they still *looked* human. Human enough to pass at any rate, if they could talk, or for that matter interact with other people in any way that didn't involve homicidal rage.

Tom whipped his rigging knife out and sliced through the first rope. The Draggers below scrambled upwards, laughing as they came, their faces locked in delirious grins. In an instant the second rope was cut as well and the ladder fell away. The Draggers landed in a heap. Two of them lay where they had fallen while the others crawled or hobbled away, broken limbs simply ignored as they left in search of easier prey.

"Quick thinkin' lad." Oleg nodded at Tom.

Tom shrugged and put his knife away.

Giles leered over Tom's shoulder. "Look Oleg, buncha girls up here."

Oleg turned to the three young women. He advanced on them menacingly. "You lot are going to tattle on us, ain't you? Rat us out for bein' in a kids tower?"

The two in the corner shook their heads, but the one with the revolver backed off a step toward the others and raised her weapon on Oleg. "Leave me be and I'll let you alone too."

Oleg advanced on her. "Yeah? Then what's a little 'un like yerself doin' with a gun pointed at my chest? You gonna use it or not?"

Tom grabbed Oleg by the arm. "Hey, they're just girls. Leave 'em be."

Giles's arm snaked around Tom's neck and he felt himself lifted into the air, his breathing cut off. In spite of his struggles, the grip grew steadily tighter. Tom closed his eyes for a moment and it was as if the intervening two years had never passed. He could smell the reek of his father's breath.

Oleg glanced over his shoulder and grunted, then turned back to his quarry. "Now little miss. We ain't gonna hurt you. Just hand over the gun, nice and slow."

She looked to Tom with concern, and in that moment, Oleg swiped a paw upwards, neatly snatching the revolver away. He slammed his other hand into her chest, sending the girl into the corner with the others, where she landed hard.

Tom felt the arm release him and fell to his knees, gasping for air.

"Now," said Oleg, "I hold alla cards. Let's have some polite conversation like we is civilized beings." He thrust the revolver through his belt. "I am Master Airman Oleg. My companions here are Airman Giles Whitworth, and Junior Airman Thomas Cain."

The older of the two girls in the corner sighed and said, "Nikki Keats and my sister, Willow, we're from town." She indicated the Revolver girl. "I have no idea who she is."

Willow, who was sitting in her sister's lap, hugging a rather ratty-looking, quilted bear,

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let out a whimper and tightened her grip around Nikki's waist. Willow looked thirteen or fourteen, and her sister a few years older. Both were rather pretty, with long, wavy brown hair framing their pale faces. Neither of them appeared prepared for a long stay in a tower. They had only light dresses on and were already shivering as the sun began to set. Tom thought about offering his fleece-lined leather jacket, but it didn't seem like the right time.

Revolver girl got to her feet and glared at the three Airmen. She was short and thin, with the angular, dark features of a Cree or Sioux, wore beaded, deer-hide pants and jacket like many Indian men, and a gun-belt with loops full of spare ammunition, wrapped twice around to fit her slim waist. Her long hair was braided at the back. She looked to be fifteen or sixteen.

Oleg and Revolver girl faced off, while below them the insane laughter of the Draggers continued. In the distance they heard screams from those too slow to make the towers in time. Oleg was first to make a move, he grabbed Revolver Girl by the gunbelt and pulled her to him. She slapped him hard across the face, but Oleg held tight, pawing at her clothes.

"What the hell!" Tom leapt forward, only to be grabbed by Giles in another choke-hold.

Oleg uncinched the belt and whipped it from around the girl's waist, then pushed her back into the corner. He turned and grinned at Tom. "Just wanted her spare ammo laddie. Nothin' improper goin' on..." he turned and leered at the girls, "yet."

Giles released Tom again. Tom fell to the floor and rubbed his neck.

Oleg towered over him. "But you try any more interferin' an' I'll skin you alive boyo." He reached to Tom's side and slipped his knife out of its sheath. "I'll be keepin' this too, so you don't go getting funny ideas." Then he picked Tom up by the front of the jacket and hurled him into the corner with the girls.

"Listen here," Oleg towered over the teens in the corner, "I'm in charge until the Mist has cleared. Me and Giles'll protect you lot from Draggers an' in return, you give us a half-day to clear off once this is all over, got it?"

Tom stood. "I'll miss my berth if you leave without me!"

Giles grinned from behind Oleg, "Shoulda thoughta that before you went runnin' yer fat mouth off."

Tom turned to the girls. "Does my mouth look fat to you? I always thought I had a rather shapely mouth. But Giles should know from fat, I mean just look at the guy!"

Giles bristled. "Yeah, wanna go tough-guy? This time I won't let up, see how funny you is without air!"

Oleg put a restraining hand on Giles's chest. "Enough! Cool off mate. We're just here a few hours 'till the Mist is gone. Then we hightail for the Myrmidon, tell the Cap'n the authorities are gonna board and check for illegal goods. He'll pull up stakes and be gone inside a few minutes and any complaints about us usin' a kids tower will be forgotten in no time. Murder is another matter. Kill him if you want, but not where I'm like to be implicated, got it?"

Oleg and Giles retreated to the opposite corner from the others. Giles crossed his arms sullenly while Oleg lay the revolver across his lap and played his finger across the finish. All around they heard the sound of Draggers laughing as they ransacked the town in search of live humans. Meanwhile the hungry Mist wrapped its ethereal tentacles around the legs of the tower and began to creep upward.

Episode 1  
Chapter 2

Tom smiled at the girls. “Oleg is an all-round muddle when it comes to introductions, I’m Tom, Tom Cain.”

Revolver Girl met his gaze with steel in her brown eyes and nostrils flared. “Agatha West.”

Tom crouched by Willow who had buried her head in her sister’s chest. “And you are Willow and Nikki Keats of course.” Willow turned to look at him. “Pleased to make your acquaintance ma’am, who’s your furry friend?” Tom shook hands with the quilted bear.

Willow giggled, buried her face again and tucked her bear tightly to her chest.

Nikki laughed. “She’s had him since she was a baby. I actually named him as a joke when I was five.” She blinked and lowered her gaze. “He’s called umm...” She coughed into her hand.

Tom tilted his head to the side with a grin. “I didn’t quite catch that.”

Willow peeked out at him. “Sir Furrybottom, she named him Sir Furrybottom.”

She held the bear out to Tom and he shook hands with it again. “Pleased to meet you.” He glanced at Nikki. “Do I have to bow or something, if he’s a knight of the realm and all.”

“No...” Nikki blushed. “He’s just a toy.”

Willow playfully punched her sister in the shoulder. “Is not! He protects me from bad men.” She glared in Giles and Oleg’s direction.

Oleg laughed. “We’re not bad little lady, just misunderstood.”

Agatha faced Oleg with a tight-lipped smile. “That’s what they all say.” She held a pretend noose around her neck. “You’ve got it wrong sirs, I’m not a bad man.” Then she made a noise like a trap door falling away and mock-hanged herself.

“Not funny.” Giles deepened into his sulk.

The screams below faded, but the maniacal laughter of the Draggers continued as the sun faded from the horizon. The Mist came most of the way up the tower and obscured everything in the town below. In the distance other towers, islands of refuge, protruded above the Mist, and way on the other side of town, a half-dozen trade zeppelins floated, among them the Myrmidon, Tom’s home for the past two years.

Tom wrapped his jacket around Nikki and Willow, Oleg broke a bit of wood from the tower wall and began whittling with his knife while Giles and Agatha stared sullenly at each other.

After some time, Oleg looked up from his carving. “All you might as well rest. Me an’ Giles’ll keep watch. Mist’ll be gone by mornin’ most like.”

Willow and Nikki curled up together in his jacket to rest, but Tom didn’t feel like sleeping. The cold mountain air bit through his linen shirt, and the constant laughter below set his teeth together like a vise. He sidled over to Agatha. “So what brought you to Milton? Don’t see too many Indians in these parts.”

“Passing through, like yourself.”

Tom nodded. “It’s that kind of town.”

“Uh huh.” Agatha rolled her eyes at him. “Look enough of the small talk. When are you gonna get my gun back for me?”

Tom blinked in surprise. “Oh... I wasn’t plannin’ on it. Oleg seems to know how to handle it. He’ll do any shootin’ we need done I suppose.”

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“He can’t shoot like me.”

“Yes, I’m sure you’re a very good shot for a girl and...”

“And what? Go on. And an Indian? Like we don’t know how to use guns? What, I should carry a bow and arrows around and slap my mouth while I holler and carry-on?” She demonstrated. “Woo woo woo! Dance around a campfire for your entertainment?”

“Hey keep it down over there.” Giles said, then closed his eyes and turned his back on them.

Tom grimaced. “Whoa, no need to be sore about it Agatha, I didn’t mean no harm.”

“You’re as bad as them if you don’t get my gun back Thomas Cain.”

“Hey, that’s layin’ it on a little thick don’t ya think? I *tried* to stop ‘em before they had a gun. I’m not risking my life so you can have your little pea-shooter back.”

“It’s not a *pea-shooter*, it’s a custom-made thirty-eight Sturm model ninety, with vulcanized rubber grips, a flip-up pinhole sight and custom-milled cylinder.” She narrowed her eyes. “And it was my Dad’s.”

Tom knew a little about shooting, but Agatha was starting to get under his skin, so he decided to return the favour. “Way I see it, it’s a gun, like any other. One end goes bang and kills things. It’s best you to stay away from that end.”

She growled in response and sunk her chin into her chest.

“Yeah, good idea.” Tom sat down next to her. “Time for some shut-eye.”

Between the laughter below, the cold, and the uncomfortable wood floor, it was a long time before he fell asleep.

#

Tom awoke to the smell of smoke. He sat up with a shock before his eyes were fully open. “Sorry Pa, I must have slept late. Is breakfast done?” He blinked and cleared his eyes. No campfire, no Pa... that chapter of his life was long past. That was a relief. His Pa would have whipped him something fierce for sleeping in.

Giles laughed. “Your Pa’s not here to take care of your ass boy.”

Tom sniffed again. No campfire, but there was a strong smell of smoke in the air. He looked over the side of the tower. The Mist below flickered orange where the Draggers had set the town alight, and in the distance two of the town’s fifty or so refuge towers were burning.

Oleg stood beside him. “Must be a smart ‘un leadin’ them, usin’ fire like that.”

Agatha snorted a laugh. “Too bad we don’t have a *smart ‘un* leading us.”

Oleg grinned at her. “Now now, try an’ act civilized, Injun.”

Agatha stood and stepped toe to toe with Oleg who was a head and a half taller than her. “Civilized, like stealing other people’s possessions?”

“That’s for yer own protection little miss.”

“Protecting us from what? Most dangerous thing up here is your damn snoring!”

An uproar of laughter below broke the conversation. Tom peered over the side, but couldn’t see a thing through the Mist. “I don’t like it. What’re they doin’ down there?”

Oleg whipped open the trap door and leaned through the hole. “Shit, they’re climbin’!” He pulled out the revolver and blasted a half dozen shots at the Draggers. The grinning mock-humans just continued their climb though, steady as ever.

Agatha whistled, mock-impressed. “Where’d you learn to shoot like that Ace? You couldn’t hit the ground throwin’ a rock!”

“Shut up!” Oleg quickly reloaded, dropping several cartridges from shaking fingers as the Draggers came ever closer. They smelled of the wild, and leered up at the humans with hungry

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eyes, laughing and chuckling as they came.

Willow screamed and Tom turned to see an arm reaching over the side of the tower wall. He ran forward as the perverted human face appeared and lashed out with a straight right, smashing the thing's nose flat. She blinked, but continued to haul herself upwards. Tom grabbed a finger and pulled. It broke with a loud pop. He broke another, and another, but the Dragger threw her leg over the wall, ignoring him completely.

The blast of the revolver next to Tom's head deafened him. The beast's head exploded, and she fell backwards off the tower. A fine mist of blood and gore settled all around.

"See I *can* hit 'em!" Oleg grinned at Agatha.

Agatha snorted. "Well dog my cats, we should call you Captain Crackerjack with shootin' like that. Two feet away and you didn't even hit dead-centre."

At the trap-door Giles was busily kicking and stomping at fingers. Tom ran over and slammed the door with a satisfying crunch of broken cartilage and bone. "Take that!" He jumped on the door, causing a new wave of crackles and pops. "Hah! Try climbing with all your fingers broken!" He whipped the door open again and several grinning faces fell away, still laughing, only to be silenced when they finally hit the ground.

The few remaining Draggers retreated, and that was the end of the assault.

Other than the mist below, the weather was beautiful, the warm sun beat down, comforting at first, but as dehydration set in it became a curse. The Mist showed no signs of receding as it normally would, if anything it was thickening in the midday sun. The Draggers stayed on too, their cackling echoed from every corner of Milton.

Three nearby towers fall to Dragger attacks that day. The six refugees in the tower did their best to shield themselves from the sun, but they were all burned and peeling by evening, throats raw and tongues swollen from thirst.

As night approached the Mist grew thicker and taller than ever. It lapped around the walls of their refuge, as if searching for a way in. Several ropy tendrils snaked through the cracks around the trap door.

Tom saw them first. "Mist coming in!"

Giles turned and saw the smoky worm creeping toward him. He screamed like a little girl and scrambled up the side of the tower wall, where he stood balancing on the thin rail. Oleg followed suit, but lay down across a corner in the wall. It looked uncomfortable, but he didn't risk falling like Giles.

The others backed away and the wisps of Mist, deprived of their targets, scabbled uselessly for purchase against the walls underneath Oleg and Giles. Then they paused, as if sniffing the air, and turned toward Tom.

It was extremely rare for someone to be turned before their nineteenth birthday, but Tom wasn't taking any chances. He hopped up on a corner and imitated Oleg. Not as uncomfortable as it looked, although he sincerely hoped he wouldn't have to sleep that way.

With nobody old enough left to attack, the mist tendrils seemed to give up, they returned to the trap door and slithered down through the cracks. Slowly the mound of Mist under their tower flattened out as if exhausted from the effort.

In the distance, moonlight illuminated mounds of Mist attacking the other towers. Screams of fear from humans, and laughter from the freshly turned Draggers told the story. The town of Milton was being overrun. Around midnight clouds rolled in, obscuring the moon and rescuing the survivors from the morbid sight of the other towers falling, one by one. Shrieks of laughter and terror mingled together through the long night.



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In spite of their exhaustion, not one of the six refugees in the tower slept.

Episode 1  
Chapter 3

The next morning broke cold and clear. A thick beading of dew had settled on the tower and the six survivors spent a few minutes lapping at the splintery wood with raw tongues to try to eke out what moisture they could. It wasn't enough. Tom was lightheaded, his lips were chapped and bleeding and his throat felt like it was packed with sand.

None of the nearby towers showed signs of life, but at least the Draggers seemed to have moved on. Laughter still echoed in the distance, but it was quiet around their tower. Better yet, gaps had started to form in the Mist below, not big enough for anyone to dare leaving the tower, but a welcome sight nonetheless. It was the airship port that gave them the most concern. Except for a pall of smoke it was nearly empty. Only one airship remained, and it swung with the breeze with a single guyline holding it in place. If anyone aboard was still alive they surely would have fled, or at least secured the zeppelin with more lines. As it was the tail swung dangerously close to a neighbouring mooring-tower every time the breeze shifted to the east.

"Myrmidon's gone and left without us." Giles stared at the abandoned port.

"Hey, maybe we lucky mate. We could have a ship of our own." Oleg scratched his chin and gazed toward the remaining zeppelin.

"Looks a little old and worn. Probably broke down an' they abandoned it."

"Ship's a ship. I wouldn't turn down a free one."

Tom joined the two former crew-mates. "If you can even get there. It's at least a mile and a half away, on the opposite side of town. Somebody else'll probably take it."

Oleg dug his fingernails harder into his chin. "Then we've gotta get there first, right mates?"

Giles nodded. "Mist's clearin' up nice out there. If we wait 'till it's mostly gone an' make a run, I bet we can get there first."

"Thought you were scared of the Mist?" Tom prodded Giles in the ribs.

"No, not I... it, err, just caught me by surprise last night is all."

"I say we get ready. Way the mist is clearin' we can probably go in a few minutes." Oleg narrowed his eyes. "Comin' Tom?"

"Me? I thought you didn't trust me?"

"I trust ye well enough once the girlies are outta the picture. Give ye a share in 'er, whaddaya say?"

Tom shrugged. "Dunno.... Who's going to protect the girls?"

Agatha shook her head. "I can protect myself if Oaf-leg would just give me my damn gun back."

Oleg grinned at her. "Not a chance sweetie. Gonna need it if there are any Draggers left about after the Mist clears." He turned to Tom. "Twenty percent, final offer. We can crew her with two, but three'd lighten the load."

It was tempting. Twenty percent of even an old airship would be more money than Tom had seen his whole life. "No..." Tom looked over at Nikki and Willow, still huddled in their corner, "I'll stay till they sound all clear."

"Suit yerself. More for us." Oleg glanced through the hatch. Mist still hung in clumps across the charred remains of Milton, but if they moved quickly they could make it.

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Giles took a knotted rope from the emergency supplies in the tower, tied it off and dropped it through the hatch. He punched Tom in the shoulder. "Sorry 'bout chokin' ye boy. You're an all-right lad." He swung over the side and began his descent.

Oleg checked the revolver and let his companion hit the ground before he followed with a brief grunt of farewell.

Tom saw the Mist react nearly as soon as the two men hit the ground. The nearby clumps started to drift toward Oleg and Giles, but they outran it easily. They disappeared between rows of charred buildings and were gone.

A movement below caught Tom's eye. He glanced down into the upturned face of a Dragger. The Dragger chuckled softly, looked up, straight into Tom's eyes and winked. Then he darted after the departed airmen, followed by several other Draggers.

"Ah hell." Tom cupped his hands. "Oleg, look out! Draggers on your trail! Oleg! Look out behind you!"

A moment later two gunshots split the air, and the Draggers broke into full throated laughter. There was a scream, cut off sharply, and then silence again.

"Told 'im he was a lousy shot." Agatha grinned at Tom. "You heard me."

"Not amusin' Agatha." Tom gritted his teeth. "They were right asses, but men all the same. Nobody should go like that."

Agatha squinted back at Tom. "Yet year after year more die that way. Good men and bad alike, it don't matter. Mist'll cover everything one day the rate it's goin'. Soon we'll probably all die, just like them."

Nikki curled her arms protectively around her sister. "Stop it! Just stop it!" She sobbed against Willow's dark curls.

"Hey, it's all right." Tom walked over and put a hand on Nikki's shoulder. "We'll get out of this."

Nikki sniffed, her eyes red and puffy. "Our parents are out there."

Willow nodded. "They were. I think they're gone now Nikki."

"Oh!" Nikki held her sister close. "Don't say that Willow. There's still a chance."

Agatha shook her head. "I think Willow's right. There's nary a sign of intelligent life out there. We're on our own."

Tom blew out a breath. "Then maybe Oleg was right too." He leaned over the rail, scanning the ground below for signs of Draggers. Down slope from Milton the Mist seemed to be gathering for another push upwards.

Agatha raised an eyebrow. "What? That oaf?"

"We're all hungry, and another day up here, waiting for the mist to clear is pretty much going to wipe us out thirst-wise. Looks like the Mist may be gathering for another push, so who knows how long we may have to wait for another shot. If the town is wiped out, our only chance is the airship, and we gotta go now."

Agatha shook her head. "You even know how to fly that thing?"

"No... I was low on the crew, they rarely even let me on the bridge. But it can't be that hard right?"

Nikki snorted. "There's about fifty dials, a dozen levers and perhaps two or three dozen buttons and switches. Some of 'em will be labelled, but if the pilot's had 'er for a few years, it's likely most of 'em are not. If it's a foreign airship they may not even be marked in English. Even so, would you know what to do with a lever marked 'right aileron'? Can you even read a chart?"

Tom shook his head.

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Nikki got to her feet. "Then you need me 'an Willow. I can fly her, Willow knows air charts."

Willow tucked Sir Furrybottom under her arm. "Right, you need us."

"Looks like.... What do you say Agatha? Join us?"

Agatha nodded. "We should try for my gun, in case there are more Draggers around."

"Agreed." Tom peered over the side at the mist. There were still patches clinging to the scorched buildings below, but not many. Far down slope though, the mist boiled upwards, clawing its way toward Milton for a second round. Tom whistled under his breath. This wasn't how Mist was supposed to behave. Once most of the people were dead the Mist always retreated, taking the Draggers with it. They never came back for just a few stragglers.

"I'll drop down first. Rest of you follow, fast as you can." Tom grabbed the rope and slithered over the side, scampering easily to the ground. The dead Draggers there were starting to smell. He looked around and cocked an ear for laughter, but there was no sound. "All clear!" He looked up to see Agatha half-way down, climbing almost as quickly as he had.

"Catch!" Willow stuck her head through the trap door and tossed Sir Furrybottom down.

Tom snagged the bear with a grin. "Welcome aboard yer knightliness. You wouldn't happen to have a sword, or some kinda weapon to go with the title would you?" The bear didn't respond. "Yeah... thought not."

Agatha alit beside him. "Who you talkin' to?"

"Oh... ahem, nobody." Tom tucked the bear beneath his arm.

"You were talking to the bear, weren't you?"

Tom grinned sheepishly. "Uhh, no... 'course not."

Agatha groaned. "I can't believe I'm following an idiot who talks to toys."

Willow dropped to the ground and retrieved her bear. Nikki followed close behind.

"Ready?" Tom gave them a once-over. Nikki had his jacket on still, she wrapped her arms around herself as if she was cold in spite of it, Willow hugged her bear tightly, and Agatha stood loose, like an athlete preparing for a run.

"Your friends went that way." Agatha pointed up an alley.

Tom nodded. "I'll take lead. Then Willow and Nikki, Agatha, you take rear-guard."

They quickly fell in line and Tom set off at a quick walk toward the point where they had lost track of Oleg and Giles.

At the intersection, Willow pointed to the right. "That way."

It seemed right to Tom, so he led them up the road. It wasn't long before they came across Oleg's body. There wasn't much left to identify him by, but the gun belt and Agatha's revolver. Tom's knife lay on the ground nearby so he picked it up and wiped it clean of blood on Oleg's pants while Agatha retrieved her weapon. There was no sign of Giles.

Tom heard laughter in the distance. "Let's get goin'."

Agatha dropped a final round into the revolver and shut the loading gate.

"Keep the same order as before." Tom set out at a light run this time, but the laughter drew nearer. It echoed between remnants of the buildings, making it seem to come from all directions at once.

Tom increased the pace until Willow could barely keep up. They rounded a corner and a figure burst from behind the corner of a building. Nikki screamed. The sun was at its back, partly obscuring the face.

Tom recognized him anyhow. "Shit Giles, you scared the crap out of me!"

Giles just laughed in response. He bared his teeth and approached them, mouth stretched

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into a wicked smirk.

Tom whipped out his knife as Dragger-Giles charged.

From behind he heard Agatha shout, "More comin' from behind!" Then a series of evenly spaced gunshots.

Tom lunged forward, slashing Giles deeply across the arm, but the former Airman ignored the wound, and with unnatural speed grabbed Tom by the throat.

Another slash across Giles's belly spilled a mass of hot organs across Tom as he fell backwards under the heavier man, but did nothing to slow the beast. Spots and sparkles drifted before Tom's eyes as he flailed madly with the knife. The smell of his father's breath came up in Tom's memory again, and rage enveloped him, but it wasn't enough. Giles had manhandled Tom before, and as a Dragger he was twice as strong. Finally in desperation Tom thrust his knife as deeply into Dragger-Giles's belly as he could, angling upwards.

Giles gasped, and his grip weakened. His eyes went vacant for a moment, then it was him, the real Giles again. His breath was rapid and shallow and a look of desperation came over him. "Sorry 'bout chokin' you 'gain..." He coughed up blood, "seem to be doin' that a lot lately." Then he sighed and sagged in Tom's arms.

Tom withdrew the knife, and rolled Giles to the side. He got to his feet, quivering and unsteady. His stomach lurched, trying to give back what wasn't there. Tom choked back the bile and fought to steady his nerves.

At his shoulder Agatha whistled low. "Maybe you're not useless after all. I cleared 'em up behind, but there's more on the way."

After passing Giles's knife to Nikki, Tom set out again. The laughter of Draggers followed them closely, never gaining or falling behind, but increasing in volume and intensity with every step. By the time they reached the airship yard Tom figured there must be a hundred of them.

They burst into the open space of the port and saw it was strewn with the wreckage of zeppelins. Most were mangled beyond recognition, but Tom caught sight of a stretch of fuselage he recognized as Myrmidon's. He paused for a moment in shock. Nearly everyone he had known for the past two years would have been aboard.

As they picked their way through the wreckage toward the mooring tower for the one zeppelin still in the air the Draggers burst from between buildings. They poured from streets and alleys into the tangled mess of smouldering airships and howled with laughter at the sight of their prey.

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Episode 1  
Chapter 4

“Go, go!” Tom pointed toward the tower where the last surviving airship floated. He ushered Nikki and Willow past and paced beside Agatha in the rear. The name Hecate was printed on the bow of the airship, and it floated with only the bow-line keeping it from drifting away on the breeze. The only way to get to the bridge would be to climb the tower, traverse the steel bow-line and climb down the rigging on the underside of the envelope to the gondola. No problem for him, and he was confident Agatha could do it, but Tom worried about Nikki and Willow.

Agatha turned every few paces and blasted a shot at the Draggers, reloading on the run. Every shot found its mark, but far from thinning their ranks, with those still pouring out of the streets the Draggers grew more numerous by the second.

Ahead the two sisters had reached the tower. They scampered up the ladder with Tom and Agatha not far behind. When they reached the top, Willow and Nikki paused.

Tom rushed past them. “No time for explanations, just watch what I do and follow!”

He lay flat on the cable and dangled one leg below. Pulling with his arms and pushing with the other leg, he quickly shimmied across the makeshift bridge to the envelope. Then Tom swung to the rigging underneath and scrambled clear. Willow and Nikki had some difficulty, but made it across, and Agatha came last. By that time the Draggers had nearly made it to the top of the ladder. Agatha turned, dangling from the rigging, and pulled out her revolver.

>Boom< >Boom< Two shots, two Draggers dropped from the ladder, the second swept several beneath him from the rungs as he fell.

“Come with me, we gotta get this thing moving!” Tom tugged on Nikki’s arm. She followed as he guided her along the rigging underneath Hecate’s envelope. More shots echoed behind them as they climbed. When they reached the walkway surrounding Hecate’s gondola, Tom swung down easily and helped Nikki.

“Release the guyline and get us moving!” He pushed her toward the bridge, and Nikki rushed to obey.

With a thump, Agatha landed next to him.

“Where’s Willow?” Tom turned toward the rigging just as her scream cut the air.

“I can’t make it!” Willow had jammed her elbow through a hole in the rigging and clung to her stupid bear as she dangled there like bait for the Draggers.

The Draggers for their part were swarming up all sides of the tower now, mostly ignoring the ladder. Many of them fell, but that didn’t do anything to slow the mob down. The first had nearly reached the guyline.

Agatha dumped her spent casings on Hecate’s deck and hastily reloaded. “Three shots left!”

“Make ‘em count!” Tom turned behind them and pounded on the glass of the Hecate’s bridge. “Release the guyline!”

Nikki was frantically fiddling with controls inside, she looked at him with panic in her eyes. “Broken! It’s all busted up in here!”

“Oh shit. Agatha, cover me, I’m going for Willow.” Tom swung back on to the rigging and clambered toward the frightened girl.

>Boom< A shot whizzed past Tom and missed every single Dragger. Deadeye Agatha sure picked a bad time to lose her nerve. He climbed on, hoping her second shot would be better.

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>Boom< Another clean miss. What the hell was she shooting at? She must have been shaking with fear. Not that it mattered, three Draggers more or less wouldn't make much difference.

>Boom< One Dragger made it on to the rigging as Agatha's third shot blasted past. Tom scrambled toward Willow, trying to beat the beast there.

"Could have at least shot that one," he muttered under his breath.

More Draggers were trying to make it across to Hecate, but instead of climbing across the cable they were jumping and falling. Tom didn't have time to figure it out, he scrambled for Willow, reaching her just before the Dragger woman.

Tom stuck an elbow and a knee into the rigging and drew his knife. The Mist-possessed woman took no precautions against falling, she scrambled, upside-down across the rigging and leapt the last few yards to grab Tom around the waist.

The move caught him by surprise, and Tom's grip on his knife slipped. He made a snatch for it and missed, watched it spin away beneath him, glinting in the sun. The woman had an iron grip around him and she hugged him close. Tom was just counting his stars, he could probably hold on long enough for Agatha to come help, and with her hands tied up the Dragger wouldn't be able to do much more damage. Then she leaned in to him, like a lover, and bit deeply into his chest muscle.

Tom screamed. The Dragger's teeth cut through skin and muscle. She pulled her head back, tearing a ragged hunk of flesh away. Out of the corner of his eye, Tom saw Willow reach inside her bear and pull out a miniature sword. As the Dragger woman leaned her head back, gorging on Tom's flesh, the little knife flashed and cut a neat line across her throat. The Dragger's eyes closed. The rictus of a smile faded from her face. Blood spewed from the cut, and her grip relaxed.

"He does have a sword..." Tom looked from the bear to Willow. "That bear was holdin' out on me."

Willow just slipped the incredibly sharp little thing away and put her free finger to her lips. "We're not what you think."

The Dragger fell away and disappeared through a partially burned-out roof. Tom gazed down. It shouldn't be rooftops. They should still be over the airship yard. He looked over his shoulder toward the guyline.

The twisted ends of the steel cable flapped in the breeze, cut in a ragged line where three bullets had ripped through it.

#

"No signs of life." Agatha reported back as Tom read the logbook in the Skipper's chair on the bridge.

Nikki was working out which controls were still functional in the mass of smashed gauges and controls of the bridge while Willow tried to find the appropriate charts so she could plot their course as the wind swept them away from Milton. They'd all eaten some hardtack from the galley and drank their fill of water, which was enough to keep them going, but Tom's stomach grumbled for real food.

Tom leaned forward and winced, his chest had a rough bandage across the bite-wound and it hurt like hell. "Signs of death?"

"Lots of blood, and most of the ship is messed up bad, but no bodies. Anything on your end?"

Tom snapped the black-covered logbook shut. "Nothin' ... whole lotta questions, very

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few answers. Seems the old Captain died a week ago, and his logbooks are gone. This one starts with landfall in Labrador. Some mention of a passenger named Ishara, who was some high muckity-muck. It ends with docking in Milton, no mention of the Mist or nothin'.... Oh and it says they were carrying lead bars as cargo. Did you find 'em on your survey?"

Agatha nodded. "Yep, though why anyone would carry so much lead is beyond me. What?" She stared gape-mouthed at the open bridge door.

Tom and the others turned to see a beautiful young woman wearing a white dress in the doorway. She had dark olive skin and long, flowing, black hair.

"Who are you? What happened here?" Tom stood and took a step toward the woman, with Agatha close behind, but the woman turned and fled. By the time they reached the door she was gone.

"What the hell! I thought you said there was nobody else aboard?"

Agatha shrugged. "I looked everywhere. She must have a hidin' spot. I heard smugglers sometimes have secret compartments, maybe...."

"Well let's search again. I'll help this time."

"You sure? You're still bleedin'."

Tom looked down. Blood seeped through the bandage and dribbled onto his bare chest, leaving a red trail. "I'll be fine. Nikki, lock the door behind us. Don't let anyone else in."

"Okey doke. You got a secret knock, or how do I know it's you?"

"I'll say it's me, Tom, open the damned door!"

Nikki grinned sheepishly. "Right.... Suppose that'd do."

#

Two hours later Tom's chest felt like it had been front-and-centre at a cattle stampede, he was hot and dirty, and no closer to finding the woman's secret hiding spot, but he did have a good feel for the layout of Hecate. She was a roomy craft, with berths for twelve crew, a well-appointed captain's quarters and beside it a small but luxurious suite, obviously intended for the mysterious passenger. That was a bit of a head scratcher, because the vanity, complete with expensive soaps, brushes and make-up, wardrobe full of fine clothes and even the four-poster bed all appeared completely unused. There was a mess hall that could fit all former passengers and crew if they squeezed in tight with a decently appointed galley and full larder. An armoury with enough guns and ammunition to impress even Agatha, and far more than any ordinary trader would need (Tom strapped on a revolver that Agatha recommended to him while they were there). There was even a well kitted-out machine room, with every tool a man could need to keep Hecate in proper running order if he knew what he was about. Lastly, a cargo bay, underneath the crew-portion of the gondola was accessed by climbing down a companionway. It had enough room to fit a stagecoach and a team of horses, and had a two-ton winch elevator.

"We've got only one engine, it keeps overheating, but it runs, also full rudders and bladder control." Nikki reported when Tom and Agatha returned.

Tom sniggered.

"The gas bladder dimwit!" Nikki threw out her lower jaw.

"Aw, don't pout. Makes you look like a man."

Nikki went red and gritted her teeth. "With only one engine we can barely manage a straight course with the rudder full-over. If the wind blows us too far starboard we'll have to do a complete three-sixty to get back on track."

"What kind of speed can you manage?"

Nikki shrugged. "Top speed, ten, maybe twelve knots. Slower if the wind forces us to



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circle around a lot, and I need to rest the engine forty-five minutes of every hour to keep it from overheatin'."

"Fuel?"

"Gauges are smashed, so I had Agatha check the tanks. She says they're completely full."

"Any chance of getting the other three engines going, or better cooling on the one?"

"Not as it stands." Nikki swept a hand over a badly beaten-up portion of the panel. "It took all I know to get that one going."

Tom rubbed his jaw. "I see. Anyone know how to fix it?" He looked each of them in the eye in turn. "Right then." He flopped down in the Captain's chair. "Willow, plot us a course for the nearest place we can get some repairs done."

"Aye Captain." Willow grinned at him.

Agatha frowned. "He's *not* the Captain!"

"Got the charts right here *Captain*." Willow glanced down at her plotting table and shoved Sir Furrybottom to the side. "Should be a coupla days if Nikki can hold a fairly straight course."

"Pilot Nikki, take your sister's course direction. Both of you teach Agatha enough so she can take shifts."

Agatha snorted. "I don't take orders from you."

Tom shrugged. "It makes sense, you've gotta admit."

Agatha shook her head. "And what're you gonna be doin'?"

Tom stood and walked to the door. "I am going to fix us some proper grub." On the threshold he turned back. "Oh, I nearly forgot. So long as we haven't found our mystery guest, Nikki and Willow is always to be accompanied by me or Agatha or in a safely locked room."

As he turned and walked away he heard Willow's "Aye Captain," followed immediately by Agatha, "He's *not* the Captain!"

### End of Episode 1

If you enjoyed Orphans of the Celestial Sea, Episode 1, please be sure to stop by my blog <http://www.brassbolts.blogspot.com> for more exciting stories. Orphans of the Celestial Sea is an ongoing serial, new episodes will appear every month, so be sure to tune in next time! Reading your awesome reviews keeps me going, please review this story, like it on Facebook or blog about it. Consider it your act of good karma for the day!

Thanks for reading!