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## HAWKSHEAD

It was not Tamzin's fault.

All she did was duck. It was instinct – that was all. She barely even saw the beer mug come flying at her, just caught the movement from the corner of her eye. But that was enough to make her Arcade fighter training kick in. So she ducked, and the mug sailed harmlessly above her head. The man standing behind her should have ducked too, but his instincts weren't as sharp as Tamzin's. The mug hit him squarely on the nose, breaking both.

That was when it all went sideways. The broken-nosed man bellowed in pain. He lunged for the mug-thrower, but, blinded by anger and spilled beer, grabbed the wrong man. His victim let out an indignant yell that summoned all his shipmates to his aid, and the little tavern was suddenly full of windmilling fists, thrown chairs, squawking barmaids, breaking glass and furious aviators intent on thumping anyone who came within reach. Tamzin dodged a swung bottle, dived beneath a table, surfaced on the far side and went to help her friends.

Oddington Doom was the veteran of more brawls and battles than he could remember, and had adopted a fighter's stance, fists clenched, lashing out with cool, scientific violence at any piece of sky trash who came near. Max Angmering, far less experienced, had snatched up a chair to defend himself from a knife-wielding Uighur aviatrix who had taken a dislike to him for no reason he could understand. Hilly Torpenhow, who had been a history tutor until very recently and thought of herself more as a thinker than a warrior, snatched a heavy wooden tray from a neighbouring table and applied it tactically to the Uighur's head. The aviatrix grunted and toppled backwards through the pane of smeared plastic that served as the tavern's only window, landing hard on the balcony outside and rolling. Max and Tamzin both went after her, stopping her before she could smash through the flimsy-looking balustrade at the balcony's brim.

They caught her just in time. Below the balcony were the town's engines and propellers, and below those an awful lot of empty sky.

The Uighur lady did not thank them for saving her. Stumbling to her feet, she cursed them loudly in her own tongue and ran back inside to rejoin the fight. Tamzin and Max stood looking at each other. When they had set off with Hilly and Doom aboard the airship *Fire's Astonishment* in search of adventure, this had not been quite the sort of thing that either of them had had in mind.

And as they stood there, listening to the din of battle

spilling from the tavern, one voice suddenly rose above the rest, shrill and terrified. “Revenant! Revenant! Run for your lives! There’s a Revenant loose!”

Oddington Doom had warned them that Hawkshead was a rough little place. “A nest of villains” had been his exact words when they’d first sighted the air town, dangling from its patchwork cloud of gasbags somewhere above the central Hunting Ground. A bundle of balsa-wood buildings and bamboo gantries, lashed together with rags of old envelope fabric, it had the off-putting look of something built by insects. But the *Fire’s Astonishment* was running low on fuel, and it seemed more efficient to dock at Hawkshead than to descend to the next city that passed by upon the ground.

It had been Hilly’s idea to visit the tavern once the *Astonishment’s* tanks were filled. “After all,” she said, “we paid that sky-high mooring fee – we might as well look around a little. I have never been aboard an air town, other than Bad Luftgarten.”

Bad Luftgarten was an elegant spa town. Hawkshead was a less classy sort of place entirely. Half the aviators who docked there were smugglers or sky-pirates, and the other half looked as though they would be happy to help out if the smugglers and pirates were short-handed. Dubious characters lurked in dingy doorways, trying to interest passers-by in unsavoury things. A parpsichord was hooting and wheezing inside the Hawkshead

Tavern, but the music stopped when the crew of the *Fire's Astonishment* walked in. The conversations that had been in progress stopped with it. All heads turned to stare at the newcomers, except for those that belonged to folk too drunk to care.

“What a dump!” murmured Max.

“Oh, it does not look too bad,” said Hilly brightly. She glanced around and caught sight of two men sitting nervously at a table near the window: an old man and a young one, dressed in robes of ginger tweed. “There,” she said, “not all the clientele are miscreants or ne'er-do-wells. Those gentlemen look like scholars. Let us go and introduce ourselves.”

It was as they picked their way between the crowded tables that someone called out, “Tamzin Pook!”

Tamzin glanced round. She didn't know the drunken airshipman who was pointing at her, but a lot of people Tamzin didn't know knew her. She had grown her hair a bit since leaving Margate, and wore aviator's clothes, but anyone who had watched one of her fights in the Amusement Arcade would recognize her. This fellow clearly had. He rose unsteadily from his seat and shouted, “You owe me thirty silver cogs, Tamzin Pook! I had a bet on Eve Vespertine to beat that hedgepig machine, and you went and let it kill her.”

Tamzin hesitated, then decided to ignore him. She had carried the guilt of Eve Vespertine's death with her for a long time, and had left it behind her at last; she was not

going to let this hairy oaf remind her of it. She looked away. By chance, her eye fell upon a yellowing page of newsprint serving as a tablecloth. *Where Is Mortmain?* asked the headline, beside a picture of a smug, bewhiskered face that Tamzin knew too well.

The hairy oaf who had yelled at her did not like being ignored, or perhaps he really did blame Tamzin for the loss of his money. He belched, then hurled his beer mug at her, and Tamzin ducked, and so everything went south until Tamzin and Max found themselves on the balcony outside the torn plastic window, listening to panicked voices take up the shout of, “Revenant!”

It occurred to Tamzin that she had ended up in trouble aboard Bad Luftgarten too. She did not have much luck on air towns.