



GOING HOME

Sand whispers down a cobbled street beneath the wan glow of a gaslamp. With a rhythmic whirring, a mechanical Peeler patrols the darkened slums, its lenses on the lookout for anyone breaking the curfew. On the other side of a curtained window a hungry baby cries while a gentle voice sings a lullaby. Behind the clockwork policeman, a door opens and laughter and music spill out briefly, but by the time the Peeler turns, all is still and silent again.

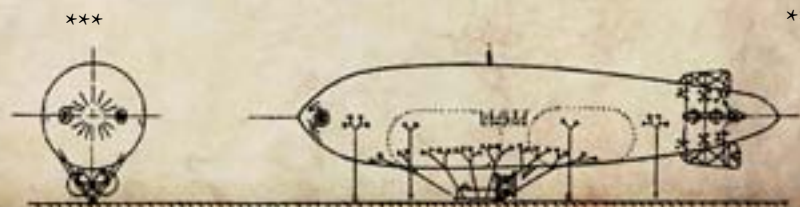
The Peeler stalks on, past high walls behind which the gentry dwell; the only sound is the whirr of the sprinklers, keeping the lawns green in the desert night.

A shadow drifts across the moon; the Peeler looks up in time to see an airship silhouetted against the silver orb. The faint sound of throbbing engines drifts down through the still air. It doesn't look like a vessel of the Imperial Air Navy, and the Peeler logs the sighting in its capacious memory – but the sky is beyond its jurisdiction, so it turns back to its duties.



The airship drifts on, away from the Neovictorian city of Desolation, out over the desert in the direction of the mountains that glimmer white with snow beneath the moon. Its engines thrum softly, and a lone figure stands at the wheel, her eyes focused on her longed-for destination.

From below comes the roar of a hunting sabre-tooth, loud in the silence of the night. The hint of a smile touches the pirate's face – the wild beasts cannot reach her up here.



The old bearded man sitting by the campfire within the ring of wagons and steam-trucks stops playing his guitar at the sound of the sabre-tooth's roar. He puts down his instrument and picks up his rifle. The mastodons in the corral stir uneasily. But the bestial cry was far away. One of the caravans is creaking gently and the old man hears a woman cry out softly on an in-drawn breath. He grins wryly to himself and picks up his guitar again.

The shadow of an airship slides across the moon – he looks up briefly and waves, though he doesn't know if anyone up there sees him.

The pirate sees the ring of Neobedouin wagons and the guttering campfire at their center, far below. She sees the old man wave, and waves in return, though she doesn't know if he sees her. Almost she wishes to fly down and join him – but her sleeping crew expect to be in High Tortuga before morning. The airship flies on.

The tavern's tables have been pushed aside, and sweaty bodies leap and stomp to the scraping music of a fiddle. The air reeks of beer and tobacco smoke as a crush of gaudily dressed men and women drink and dance the night away. Suddenly, the door bursts open, and a voice shouts over the din; “The *Bright Shadow!* The *Bright Shadow's* coming in!” There is a cheer, and one particular young man is at the front of the crowd that spills out onto the dockside to watch the approaching airship.

The floating city of High Tortuga bobs and sways slightly below its mighty gasbags, the massive chains that anchor it to the peaks flexing as it shifts in a mountain breeze. The mountains close in on either side as the airship flies up the valley, and tricky air

currents pluck at the flying vessel. But the woman at the helm steers with a steady hand – she's fought these currents many a time, they're as familiar to her as the thrum of her airship's engines.

She takes a moment to reach into her waistcoat pocket and pull out the coin she keeps there. She can make out the profile of Emperor Victor I as it catches the light, and the date, 2011. A grim year, a year of fear and despair, of jackboots and internment camps and the endless feeding of the beasts. She lost some good crew, men and women both, back then. She savors a last melancholy moment of solitude in the high cold mountain air, then slips the coin back into her pocket.

Ahead, the Skyloft city is a blaze of light that outshines the moon. They say that High Tortuga never sleeps, and tonight is no exception. The pirate rings the ship's bell and yells to her crew: “All hands on deck and prepare for docking!” Men and women stumble from their hammocks and up into the cold night air. Mooring lines are thrown over the side as the airship approaches the docks, where many other airships bob at anchor. Willing hands on the sky platform grab the lines and pull the airship down to safe harbor.

The crew pour off the ship and are taken up into the swelling crowd as they surge back toward the warmth of the welcoming inn. The woman stays aboard until the rest have gone, making sure everything is shipshape before she leaves her vessel. By the time she saunters down the gangplank, there is only one man left on the quayside. She walks up close to him and looks up into his smiling face.

“Well?” he says, with a quizzical look.

She grins a little, her eyes dancing. “I brought us treasure.”

Then his arms are around her, and she's home.

