

PHILIP REEVE
NIGHT
FLIGHTS

ILLUSTRATED BY IAN McQUE

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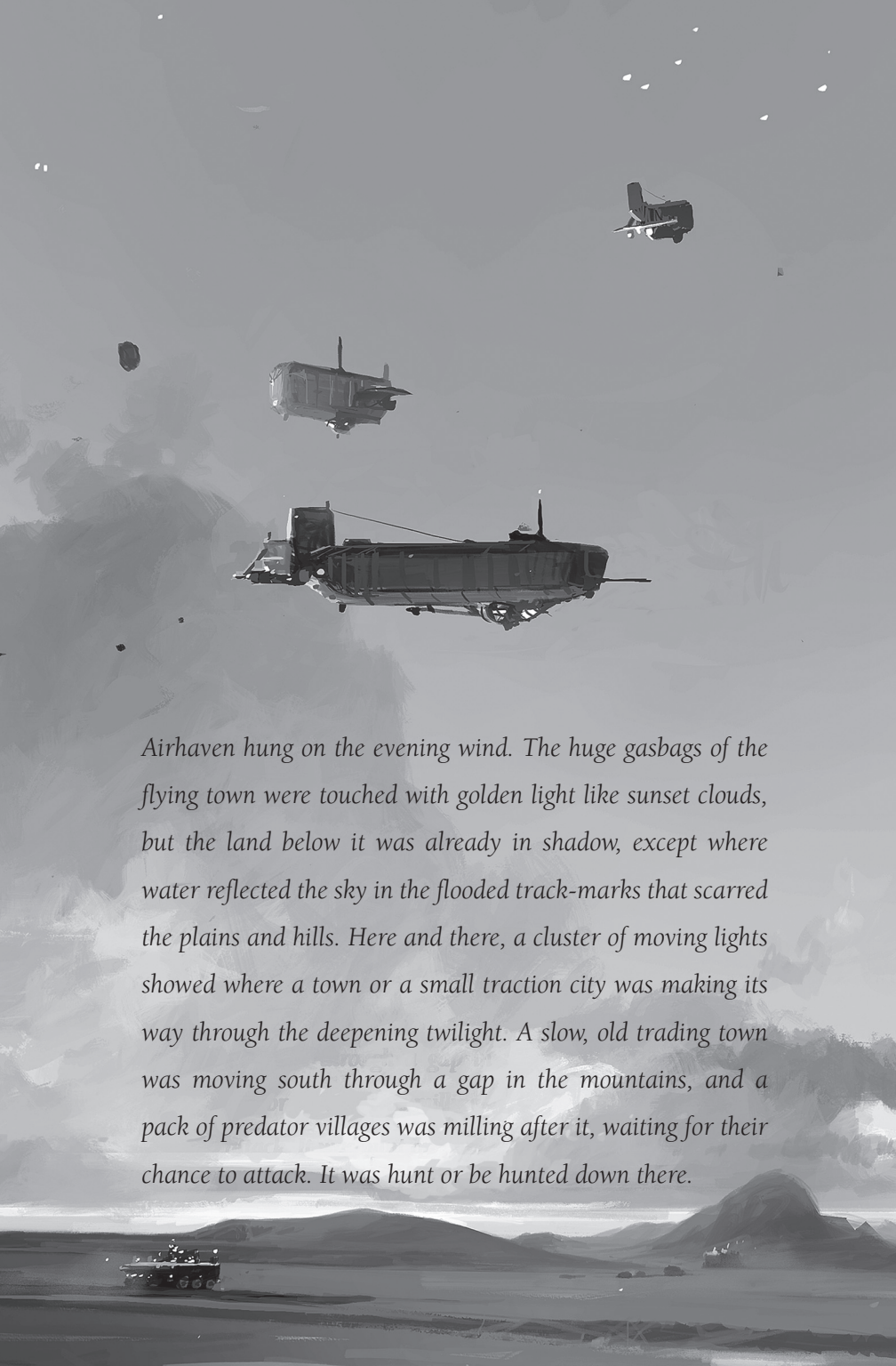
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PHILIP REEVE





Airhaven hung on the evening wind. The huge gasbags of the flying town were touched with golden light like sunset clouds, but the land below it was already in shadow, except where water reflected the sky in the flooded track-marks that scarred the plains and hills. Here and there, a cluster of moving lights showed where a town or a small traction city was making its way through the deepening twilight. A slow, old trading town was moving south through a gap in the mountains, and a pack of predator villages was milling after it, waiting for their chance to attack. It was hunt or be hunted down there.

But no one in Airhaven had to worry about such things. Nothing hunted Airhaven, where aviators and air-traders from the Traction Cities mingled on almost-friendly terms with flyers from the static strongholds of the Anti-Traction League. In the low-roofed, lamp-lit public rooms of the Gasbag and Gondola, Airhaven's finest pub, traders from London did deals with merchants from Lahore, and travelers from the Traktiongrads learned the latest songs from Nuevo Maya. There was good food and good drink, and soft beds for aviators who wanted a change from the narrow bunks aboard their airships. And best of all, there were stories to be heard, for no one had such good stories as the men and women who made their lives upon the Bird Roads, and no one took such pleasure in the telling of them.

That night, a large group had gathered around the circular table in the main bar, under one of the propellers from the old air-clipper Tardigrade, which had been repurposed as a ceiling fan. Nils Lindstrom was there, the captain of the freighter Garden Aeroplane Trap; he had been making everyone's flesh creep with an account of unearthly things he had seen in the Ice Wastes. Now Yasmina Rashid of the privateer Zainab was telling of a running fight she'd had with

pirate box kites above the dry, red hills of Yemen, while Jean-Claude Reynault of the *La Belle Aurore* chipped in with his tale of a similar battle over the Yellow Sea. Coma Korzienowski, commander of *Traktionstadt Coblenz's* armed reconnaissance vessel *Todeswurst*, listened with a look on her face that let the others know she had a story of her own to tell, and that it was going to be a good one.

“So what about you, Anna Fang?” asked Reynault, when Yasmina had finished with her pirates. “You’ve flown farther than any of us. Don’t you have a tale to share?”

The woman he was speaking to sat on the far side of the table. She had tipped her chair back so it leaned against the wall, and her face was in shadow. A handsome, wind-browned woman with streaks of white in her short black hair. She had listened to all the stories that evening and laughed as loud as anyone at the funny parts, but she had said nothing, and she said nothing now, just smiled at Reynault. Her teeth were stained red with the juice of betel nuts.

“Anna doesn’t tell her stories,” said Yasmina. “Short answers to long questions, that’s her way. She’ll tell you, ‘I grew up in the slave-holds of Arkangel and built my airship out of parts I stole,’ but she’ll never tell you how or when.”

“Or she’ll say, ‘I flew over the haunted deserts of America once,’” said Lindstrom, “but she’ll never tell you what she saw there. People tell stories about Anna, but Anna never tells them herself.”

“She’s a spy for the Anti-Traction League,” said Coma Korzienowski. “She’s been trained to tell no one anything, and when she does tell you something it’s most likely a lie. Isn’t that right, Anna?”

Anna Fang laughed. “Let’s hear Coma’s story,” she said. “She’s been itching to tell it all night.”

Coma protested that she had not, then started telling it anyway. It was a story that Anna had heard before, so she did not bother following the words, just let herself enjoy the sound of Coma’s voice, the laughter of the others, their faces in the lamplight. She was fond of them all; some were old friends and some old adversaries, and here in Airhaven the difference did not matter much. But she did not want to share her stories with them. Stories changed when you told them. You made up new details to please your listeners, you exaggerated things or left things out, and soon even you came to believe the new story was the real one. Anna wanted hers to stay the same, as true as her memory could keep them.



But perhaps she should tell someone, she thought. Perhaps when she next flew home to Shan Guo she would tell Sathya, the barefoot kid she'd rescued down in Kerala, who was the closest thing that Anna had to family. She would start at the beginning, with the one story about Anna Fang that everybody knew, of how she had escaped from the slave-pens of Arkangel when she was just a girl, in an airship she had built for herself.

Except that the real story had been, like all real things, more complicated than stories made it sound . . .