

Sven Haupt

Anahita (2019)

"I don't give a damn," Morgan yelled into the brass tube, "how many warning lights are flashing on the display! I told you to increase the damn power to the engine! I need more thrust!"

For a moment, there was stunned silence on the other side, then a torrent of angry curses came from the tube leading down to the engine room. Morgan stifled the clamor by wordlessly jamming the large shutter back into the brass funnel.

Shortly thereafter, the large propeller nacelles on the side of the hull hummed louder, and she felt the airship pick up speed.

"There you go," the young woman murmured and corrected the course with practiced movements on the large steering wheel. She pulled a lever, and, with a loud hiss, gas was fed into the balloon. The familiar tug in her stomach told her that the ship was gaining altitude.

Meanwhile, muffled curses drifted up from the floor hatch. She heard the puffing stomp of a hydraulic leg slowly making its way up the stairs to the deck. It was followed by the rumbling murmur of a deep bass voice. Then a thick, red head came into view, and the body that belonged to it heaved itself heavily up through the hatch.

"I resent that tone, young lady!" the big man thundered, pushing his massive form onto the deck. "I am still Consul Cameron, supreme authority of this planet here, and I expect the proper respect."

"I am not your *young lady*," Morgan replied coolly, "but *Captain* Morgan to you, Consul. I had to send someone to the engine room, for as you can see, I am at the helm. However, if the gentleman has any difficulty in following simple instructions aboard *my* ship, Your Grace is welcome to swim ashore if you wish. It is not far. Only a solid two hundred feet of air under our keel to the surface of the sea, and then another thirty fathoms to the bottom."

"If I'd known," Cameron growled, "what kind of insolence I'd have to listen to, I'd have negotiated a different price."

"Ditto," Morgan retorted dryly.

"What's all the fuss about anyway?" the consul asked, stumping heavily on his mechanical leg to the young woman at the helm. The hydraulics hissed softly with each step.

"We've got company," the young woman replied, gruffly wiping a few unruly strands from her forehead. "Behind us, at seven o'clock, four dashes above the horizon." She handed the man the telescope.

"Son of a bitch," the big man cursed, searching the horizon. "Where, where? I don't see anything."

"Back there," Morgan replied, annoyed, and slanted the telescope down with her finger.

"You can't see the ships themselves yet," the young woman explained, "but what is easy to see are the big blue helium balloons. I mean the ones with the bright yellow sign of the religious police on the side."

"You've got to be kidding me," the consul rumbled. "You assured me that you know these skies like the back of your hand and have never been caught."

"That's correct," Morgan countered, "Never caught. There was never any mention of being spotted or chased, though."

"You told me," the consul rumbled, "your ship would be the fastest smuggling boat on Epsilon\_3, or Anita, or whatever the locals call this oozing, oceanic nightmare."

"A-na-hita," Morgan pointed out, "We call our planet *Anahita*. And yes, I owe the fastest free airship in these latitudes."

"So, we just fly away from them, don't we?"

"I don't think that's very likely."

"How do you already know that?"

"Simple mathematics," replied Morgan. "We have a steam pinnace barely fifteen meters long with a hold full of sixty heavy boxes of highly illegal cigars. We're being pursued by two religious police clippers twice as long, which would be considerably faster than we are, even fully loaded."

"Surely you're not going to give up!" exclaimed Cameron in horror. "I was promised delivery."

"Don't worry, Consul," the young woman assured him. "A deal is a deal. Besides, a Morgan never forgets anything. The gentleman can count on that."

"That's decidedly reassuring," snapped the man irritably. "So, what do you intend to do, Captain Morgan? They're getting closer all the time."

"I intend to go into hiding," the woman countered. "It's time to get out of here."

"How, pray, do you propose to make an entire airship vanish in empty sky?" the consul asked sarcastically.

"Cloud bank," Morgan replied curtly, pointing to a broad front of white clouds above them.

"Isn't that illegal?" asked Cameron.

"I hope so," Morgan replied cheerfully, pulling on the throttle again, more forcefully this time. There was a hissing hiss, and the ship lurched upward, the consul clinging to the rudder, swaying.

"But then they'll know right away that we have something to hide," he whined.

Morgan smiled humorlessly. "Would you rather wait until the investigators come aboard and find the planet's consul, along with his illegal cigars, in my cargo hold?"

"I should never have put my business in your hands," the man grated.

"I specifically warned you not to come aboard for this trip," Morgan reminded him.

"You don't seriously believe," the big man was indignant, "that I would put a cargo of cigars into the hands of a little *girl*? My load is worth more in this God-forsaken latrine in the galaxy's last arm than your whole damn water sack from a planet."

At that moment, the slender airship flew into the cloud bank and dense fog smothered the discussion.

Sighing, Morgan fished a cigar and lighter out of the inside pocket of her jacket and puffed contentedly in the consul's direction a moment later.

"Don't tell me," growled Cameron, "that this came from my load."

"The *girl*," Morgan countered coolly, "likes your cigars very much, thank you. It's good quality."

"That's my pension you're smoking, Captain," the consul pointed out irritably.

"Ah?" asked Morgan amiably. "The gentleman wishes to retire?"

"Can't see water anymore," the consul replied wearily. "Grew up on Sumeru. Too much water makes me uneasy ... too much sky, too."

Morgan frowned.

"Hasn't Sumeru been a war zone between the Crown and the Clockwork Guardians for ages?"

"Ha!" exclaimed Cameron with a laugh, slapping his mechanical prosthesis. "Tell me about it!"

"Ah, a veteran, then?" asked Morgan with interest.

"Three times decorated," grunted the big man bitterly. "Honorable and heroic. The whole shebang."

"You served the crown?" asked Morgan with interest?

"Learned it on my mother's knees," Cameron grunted softly. "Mother and Father broke the power of the religious police on Sumeru. But Father was also a personal emissary."

"He was a what?" asked Morgan, irritated.

"Never mind," Cameron waved it off. "Long story. It was here, where I've been on my own, all these years." He looked down at his big hands as if there was the future to be seen there. "I wanted to break their power here, too," he muttered, as if to himself. "I tried with every means at my disposal. But this damn cult is like a plague you can't beat."

"And the cigars?" asked Morgan quietly.

"My latest attempt to use money to convince the right places that change is in order."

"You would think," Morgan announced, "that a great consul would have more influence on the political situation of a world."

"Consul," Cameron countered with a sneer. "Also, just another decoration pinned to your forehead."

"Let me guess," Morgan retorted, "they promoted the gentleman to consul as a thank you?"

"What you call thanks," Cameron acknowledged somberly. "Nice reward. Here, you big hero. As a gift, we'll give you a planet with radical prohibition, where the damn church

cult has even more power than in your home world and you can't do anything but drown. It's just plain bullshit."

A loud bang shattered the silence. Something buzzed close to them in the fog, tracing a trail through the water vapor.

"That was a gunshot!" the man shouted.

"No really," Morgan replied dryly. "I thought we blew a tire."

There was another bang, this time the projectile flew far astern of the ship.

"Time for some serpentines," Morgan commented, turning the rudder briskly. The airship banked sharply on its side and the consul, cursing, tried to stay on his feet.

"The plan wasn't," he cried in panic, "to get my ears shot off here! What kind of smuggler are you, anyway?"

"You needn't worry, Consul," Morgan reassured him. "They've never hit anything before."

"Are you foolish?" cried Cameron in horror. "They're shooting real guns at us!"

"I noticed that, thank you," Morgan replied with a smile. "In fact, these are two forward-firing 42-pound carronades."

"And what, pray tell, is the difference?"

"Carronades are lighter and have a much shorter range."

"That's exceedingly reassuring. What if they hit us anyway?"

"They're not trying to hit us at all. They're trying to hit the balloon."

"What happens then?"

Morgan stared at him for a moment.

"Then," she explained slowly, "we crash, Consul."

"Oh my God!" exclaimed Cameron, looking wildly around. "Can this thing float?"

"Can this *ship* float, Consul? Is that what you are asking me?" asked Morgan. "Of course, this ship can float. But that's not the problem."

"And what is the problem?"

"That which comes after. Mainly in the form of sharks."

"It's not like we have to go swimming with them!" the man shouted, his voice rolling over.

"The sharks in this world are bigger than this ship," Morgan added calmly.

"Bigger?" the consul asked, aghast.

"Everything in this world is bigger than us," laughed the young woman. "Welcome to Anahita, or Epsilon\_3, in the official designation. I thought everyone knew that."

The consul looked down haughtily at Morgan.

"I had the economy of an entire planet to coordinate," he explained, disgruntled. "I didn't have time to do biological studies."

"Perhaps if the gentleman," Morgan interjected, "had spent a little less time selling our oil from the rigs directly to the black market, you'd know the native fauna a little better. That might come in handy today."

"You're amazingly impertinent," Cameron growled, "considering you're depending on official representatives not revoking your captain's license."

Morgan passed over this impassively. "For someone who was chief administrative officer here for ten years, you know surprisingly little about this world, Consul."

Cameron snorted snidely. "Nice world you have here," he grunted. "Ninety-eight percent water, crammed with monsters that want to eat you. No beer, no tobacco, and names for everything that no man can remember. Only a drunk could come up with the idea of naming a planet 'Anita.'"

Morgan smiled.

"*Anahita* comes from Persian and means *water goddess*. These names all still come from the old earth. The first settlers arrived here centuries ago, before the official naming laws of the church were enacted."

"At least you understand something about the local culture," Cameron commented, annoyed. "since smuggling obviously isn't your thing. Where's the much-vaunted speed of your great Pinnacle, anyway?"

"They haven't caught up with us yet, have they?" asked Morgan cheerfully.

"I really don't know," grunted the consul indignantly, "where your ship got that reputation. All the world has praised your Caesar."

"She's called *Cecilia*," Morgan corrected, calmly smoking on.

"Who names a ship Cecilia, anyway?" snorted Cameron, annoyed. "Does that mean anything fancy here, too?"

Morgan continued to look calmly into the white mist.

"In the language of my family," she replied tonelessly, "it means *mother*. She died giving birth to me."

Silence reigned for a moment as it worked on the man's face.

"I beg your pardon," he finally gritted out.

"It's okay, Consul," Morgan replied amiably. "I know you're under a lot of pressure right now. Time, after all, brings great changes to your career. When else do you go from corrupt administrator to hunted criminal in less than a day?"

The big man snorted snidely.

"You really are an impudent brat," he rumbled, limping slowly to the railing. "Why don't they shoot anymore?"

"Because they're not stupid," Morgan replied. "Ammunition is expensive, and the chance of hitting us in this soup is nil."

The consul eyed the rail. "You might find a couple of guns quite useful," he remarked.

"Why don't you have any? There's just a row of strange big searchlights mounted on the side here."

"I'm no friend of cannons," Morgan countered, "I promised my father I'd never bring guns on his ship."

"That's strange advice, given your profession. Where is your father?"

"He's dead."

"I'm sorry to hear that. You're a full orphan, then. And at such a young age. May one ask what the circumstances were?"

"Sharks," Morgan answered curtly.

"Sharks?" the consul asked, aghast.

Morgan stared ahead into the fog.

"Drunken officers of the religious police threw him overboard during a search," she explained.

Cameron remained silent.

"Did he not want to reveal his illegal charge?", he finally asked.

"He picked a fight to distract the searchers from searching the ship. No one was supposed to find his cargo."

"What cargo?"

"I was twelve years old. Hid in the sewage tank."

Cameron hesitated. "What happened?"

"The searchers drank themselves unconscious," Morgan replied, "with the booze we had on board, and took the Cecilia in tow to the next port. The next morning, they were sober again, my ship was gone, and I captain."

They were silent for a while.

"The religious police enforcement officers have a very, ahem, mixed reputation," the consul commented cautiously.

"You could say that," Morgan replied calmly.

"Amazing," the big man added slowly, "that no one has found you. As a rule, the officers search extremely thoroughly, not to say meticulously."

Morgan fell silent and kept smoking.

Deep blue skies stretched over the ship as they left the cloud bank. The consul trudged to the aft rail and scanned the cloud bank with his telescope. Then he began to curse.

"There's the bastards, too!" he shouted. "They're still right on our heels!"

"I know," Morgan retorted without turning around.

"What do you mean, you know!" the man roared indignantly. "I thought we were going to lose them."

Morgan looked ahead, unmoved, and pulled on the throttle again.

"Not a chance," she replied as the ship continued to climb. "The cloud bank wasn't intended to throw off our pursuers at all, either. I was merely trying to buy us time."

"Time for what?" exclaimed Cameron, who seemed at his wits' end.

Morgan wordlessly pointed up to the sky.

The consul turned and his gaze followed her finger. For a moment the man stared in irritation, then his eyes widened.

"Oh, you merciful watchmaker," he sighed. "What's that now?"



Above the ship, the sky hung full of balloons.

*At least, Cameron thought, it looked that way.*

The size was not right at all. Next to the scattered white clouds, the round things looked small, but distance was deceiving. Each of these spherical structures must have been easily a hundred meters in diameter.

*These things are huge.*

Some were whitish and translucent, others semi-transparent like cloudy glass. They looked like compressed clouds that someone had poured into spherical shapes. Glass balloons filled with milky mist.

Each of the strange balloon creatures pulled dense bundles of long strings beneath them. The sight was at once incredibly peaceful and very disturbing. There had to be hundreds of them.

"Now gigantic air jellyfish, too," the man commented quietly. "I should have stayed in the war."

"A Kaylanee herd," Morgan explained, "the largest over this stretch of ocean."

"What are these things doing here?" he asked.

Morgan looked up at the swarm with a smile and shaded her eyes with one hand.

"It's daytime, so the flock is sleeping. At night, the animals are more active, so you can see them from much farther away. I'm sure you've observed the glow before, Consul. Bright pulsing lights in the night sky."

"That's from those things?" asked Cameron, puzzled. "They're making the lights?"

"Where did you think," Morgan replied, "the lights in the night sky were coming from?"

"Spaceships?" the big man asked helplessly.

"Tell me," Morgan asked skeptically, "has the gentleman actually left his orbiting mansion at all in the last ten years?"

"Not to stare at fat jellyfish," grumbled the consul. "Why do they even produce a light show at night?"

"It's their way of communicating."

"How now?" the consul asked, aghast. "Communicate? Those things are alive?"

"Of course, they're alive," Morgan replied, irritated.

"What did you call the balloon things again?"

"By the locals," Morgan explained, "the animals are called Kaylanee. The name comes from an old Earth island called *Hawaii*. It's short for Keahilani. It means *heavenly fire*."

"You are a cornucopia of useless information, Captain Morgan," the consul commented grimly, but smiled as he did so. "How are these big gas bubbles up there going to be helpful to us?"

Morgan swung the rudder around and pointed the bow of the ship directly at the densest part of the swarm.

"The herd doesn't like disturbances," Morgan explained.

"Disturbances, like a cannonball?" the consul asked.

"Exactly. Or A ship bumping into them," added the young woman.

"What happens," the consul asked cautiously, "if you annoy the animals?" He watched anxiously as the first balloon animals grew larger.

"See the long arms under the bodies?" asked Morgan, quickly turning the rudder to avoid the first animals that drifted slowly and majestically into their path. "Much like the cnidarian arms of a jellyfish."

The consul looked up in bewilderment at the massive animal bodies that slid past them as if in slow motion. He felt tiny in the face of such size.

"I suppose," he asked, "they don't bode well?"

"They augur suckers and barbs. Any unwary prey is immediately wrapped up and then pulled up into the body for digestion."

"How wonderful nature is," the man replied in a quivering voice.

Making his way through the herd of silently drifting giants was equally impressive and terrifying. Morgan steered the small ship with great skill between the bodies of the animals and never once seemed to be under stress. On the contrary, she was smiling the whole time.

The consul, who had returned to the stern rail, did not address her and left the woman alone. The presence of the swarm had a stifling effect on him. The ship was surrounded by the silent monsters. Sometimes the long, fibrous arms drifted past the railing just a few feet away. Upon closer inspection, the arms seemed to wriggle and writhe

restlessly, as if they were searching for a foothold. Shuddering, the consul closed his eyes and held his breath as he clung to the railing.

The herd seemed to isolate them completely from the world. No sound was heard, no wind felt. And yet it didn't seem completely silent. One thought one could hear the silent colossi breathing and softly panting. At one point, as Morgan hissed gas into the balloon, he thought he heard the nearby animals respond with a soft hiss. But he could have imagined that.

He watched Morgan cautiously from the side, but the young woman seemed completely calm and unaffected by her surroundings. She even leaned on the oar with her arms folded and puffed on her cigar with a pensive smile.

It was hard to tell how long it took the ship to cross the herd. It could have been minutes, or it could have been hours.

When they finally flew out of the center of the herd into the open and the blue sky appeared above them again, Cameron exhaled audibly.

"Good grief," he groaned, "what a nightmare. If I ever get to my retirement with my cigars, I'll bury myself in a cave in the deepest desert and even give up bathing."

Morgan just smiled.

The ship had just left the last of the swarm's misfits behind when the consul yelled out loud and pointed at the swarm.

"Holy crap!" he cursed loudly, "Are you finally trying to screw me or what?"

From the center of the swarm flew in close formation the two clippers of the religious police. They were now so close that individuals on deck could be distinguished.

"So much," the consul coughed, "for your unique skills as a helmsman."

"*Helmswoman*," Morgan corrected curtly. "The clippers are very maneuverable, and the airships' technical equipment includes the latest anti-collision mechanics."

"You and your useless information!" the consul exclaimed. "How can you remain so calm about this. Your great plans are fucked!"

"Pull yourself together, Consul," Morgan admonished him coldly. "There's still a lady aboard."

"I swear to you, if I don't- " the big man began, raising his forefinger threateningly.

At that moment Morgan jerked the wheel around so abruptly that it knocked the consul off his feet, and he slammed hard into the rail.

The ship lay groaning on its side and swung around on the spot until it righted itself alongside the shoal.

Even as the consul struggled ponderously to his feet, cursing loudly and obscenely, Morgan had already leapt light-footed to the rail and pulled a lever.

With a loud, electric pop, the spotlights on the long side of the ship came to life, spraying sparks. One bulb after another flared brightly and then went out again.

Together they created irregular patterns that ran rapidly up and down the hull.

The consul stared open-mouthed at the spectacle of light.

Morgan paid no attention, her gaze fixed firmly on the pursuers. A strange expression was on her face.

"What ...", the consul began, but immediately fell silent again.

The swarm answered.

Lights flashed deep within the bodies of the silent giants. Slow and distant at first, but quickly growing brighter. Patterns of light ran through the bodies of the giant creatures and seemed to match the pattern of the headlights.

Then, as if at a silent command, the swarm closed around the two pursuing ships.

Creatures made of gas should not be able to move that fast. It looked as if the massive bodies were falling straight down onto the ships. A few seconds later, they were barely recognizable under the mass of writhing arms.

"Holy Mother of God," breathed the consul. Then he stared wildly at the woman. "What kind of diabolical shit have you come up with?" he cried in horror.

"I told you I could guarantee delivery," the young woman replied without looking at him.

"You didn't mention," the consul shouted, now completely losing his composure, "that we were planning to kill two full ship crews on the way there!"

The young woman paid no attention to him. She had her cigar back in her mouth and was watching thoughtfully as the crews struggled unsuccessfully to free the ships from the grasp of the tentacles.

The man stared at Morgan, stunned. Then his gaze wandered from the searchlights to the herd and back. He gave a long-drawn-out groan. "This was planned right from the start, wasn't it?" he whispered. "You supply the food to these monsters and in return you get free passage through their territory. That's it, isn't it?"

"Anahita is a place of untold possibilities for a good trade," Morgan commented absently. "If you only know how to make the right contacts."

Cameron looked at her in disgust. "What kind of sick way of trading is that, please?"

The woman did not take her eyes off the two ships hopelessly entangled in the Kaylanees' arms, slowly being pulled up to their bodies.

"I told you before, Consul: a deal is a deal." She smiled coldly. "A Morgan does not forget, and you, Consul, are not alone in your fight."