

# The Court of the Air

Stephen Hunt

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Extract

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## Chapter One

Molly Templar sat dejected by the loading platform of the Handsome Lane laundry. An empty cart bore testament to the full tub of clothes inside, bubbling away. At least Molly tried to imagine what dejected would feel like, and scrunched her freckled face to match the mood. In the end though, it was one of the other poorhouse girls, Rachael, who came to fetch her, not the Beadle, so Molly's player-like mastery of 'dejected' went unappreciated.

Damson Snell, the mistress of the laundry, came out to see who had turned up, and looked disappointed that it was just another Sun Gate workhouse girl. 'The Beadle too busy to see the quality of the idle scruffs he's forcing on my business, then?'

'His apologies, miss,' said Rachael. 'He is otherwise engaged.'

'Well, you tell him from me, I got no room for workers as slack as this one.' Snell pointed to Molly. 'You know what I caught her doing?'

'No miss.' Although Rachael's tone suggested she might have an inkling.

'Reading!' Damson Snell's face went red with incredulity.

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‘Some gent had left a thruppence novel in the pocket of his coat and she—’ her finger stabbed at Molly ‘—was only bloody reading it. And when I bangs her one, she cheeks me back. A fine little madam and no mistake. You tell the Beadle we runs a place of work here, not a library. When we wants a lady of letters, I’ll send for an articulated clerk, not some Sun Gate scruff.’

Rachael nodded with her best impression of contrite understanding and led Molly away before the laundry owner could extend her tirade.

‘A fine lesson in business from her,’ said Molly, when they were out of earshot. ‘She who slips the Beadle twenty shillings a month and gets her labour free from the poorhouse. Her lesson in economics forgot to include a fair wage for those who have nothing to sell but their labour.’

Rachael sighed. ‘You’re turning into a right little Carlist, Molly. I’m surprised you weren’t turned out for trying to organize a worker’s combination. That thruppence novel in the gent’s pocket wasn’t a copy of *Community and the Commons*, was it?’

‘From one of her customers?’ Molly snorted. ‘No, it was a naval tale. The jolly aerostat *Affray* and its hunt for the submarine pirate Samson Dark.’

Rachael nodded. The Kingdom of Jackals was awash with writers from the publishing concerns along Dock Yard, sniffing out heroes, bandits, highwaymen and privateers to fill the pages of pocket news sheets like *The Middlesteel Illustrated News* and the cheap penny dreadfuls, fact and fiction blended into cut-price serials to hook the readers. The more imaginative stories even plundered legend, culling gods from the dark days before the citizens of Jackals embraced the Circlist meditations; writing devils like the wolftakers onto the pages of their tales, fiends sent to kidnap the wicked and terrify the immoral with their black cloaks and sharp teeth.

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Viewed from the workhouse, the stories were bright distractions, an impossible distance from the children's lives of grind and hunger. Molly wanted those stories to be true, that if only somewhere there might be bright ballrooms and handsome officers on prancing horses. But the hard-bitten streak of realism in her realized that Samson Dark had probably been a violent old soak, with a murderous temper and a taste for cargoes he was too lazy, idle and stupid to earn himself. Far from fighting a glorious battle, the jolly airship *Affray* had probably blundered across the pirate fleet feeding innocent sailors to the fish, then held position over Dark's underwater vessel while they tumbled fire-fins into her masts and deck, leaving the burning pirates to the mercy of the ocean and the slipsharps. Days later some hack from Dock Yard would have chanced across the drunken aerostat crew in a tavern, and for the price of a keg of blackstrap, teased out an embellished tale of glory and hand-to-hand combat. Then the hack would have further embroidered the yarn for his editors on the penny dreadfuls and Dock Street imprints like the Torley Smith press.

'Have I been blown to the Beadle yet?' asked Molly, her concerns returning to the present.

'As if you wouldn't have been,' said Rachael. 'Though not by me – I'm no blower. This *is* the fourth job you've been chucked from in as many months. He was going to find out somehow.'

Molly teased her red hair nervously. 'Was the Beadle angry?'  
'That's one word for it.'

'Well, what can he do?' asked Molly.

'You're a fool, Molly Templar,' said her companion, seeing the flash of defiance in Molly's eyes. 'What haven't they done to you? The strap? Administrative punishment, more days on than off? Short rations? And still you ask for more.'

'I'm out of it soon enough.'

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‘You’ve still got a year to go before your ward papers expire and you get the vote,’ said Rachael. ‘That’s a long time to have the Beadle pissed off at you.’

‘One more year, then I’m out of here.’

‘To what?’ asked Rachael. ‘You think an orphan scruff like you or me is going to end up nobbing it up in grand society? Being waited on with partridge pie and the finest claret? You don’t settle to a living soon and you’ll end up running with the flash mob on the street, dipping wallets, then the crushers will have you and it’ll be a transportation hulk to the Concorzian colonies for our young Damson Molly Templar.’

‘I don’t want to end up back there.’ Molly flipped a thumb in the direction of the Handsome Lane laundry.

‘Nobody wants to end up there, Molly girl. But if it puts food in your tummy and a roof over your head, it’s better than starving.’

‘Well, I’m being starved by a gradual process in the poor-house, or by a quick one out of it,’ said Molly. ‘If only . . .’

Rachael took Molly’s hand. ‘I know. I miss the damson too. And if wishes were shillings we’d all be living like princesses.’

There was only one damson for the orphans. Damson Darnay had been the head of the Sun Gate poorhouse before the Beadle; four years now since her heart attack. A reformer, she had argued that the rich financial district of Middlesteel could afford a model poorhouse on its doorstep. A house where the children were taught to read and write, where the mindless make-work of the poorhouse was replaced by an education and a good Circlist upbringing.

It was a vicar from the Circlean church who had taken away her shroud-wrapped body on the back of a wagon one cold morning, and the Beadle who turned up to take her place. In the pocket of the local merchants, the cost of their keep

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was now defrayed by placement in local businesses. Ward apprenticeships to prepare the grateful orphans for their necessary adult living.

It was strange how the children's placements never included perching behind a warm desk in one of the fancy new pneumatic buildings along Gate Street, or an articulated clerk's position along Sun Lane. Sewer-scrapers, yes. Laundry jobs that would see your nails fall out from constant dipping in chemical bleach. Positions in dimly lit workshops and mill works, hunched over a loom or cutting engine, splashed by metal and losing a finger a year.

Small for her age, Molly had spent her own twelfth and thirteenth years as a vent girl, climbing the dark airshafts of the Middlesteel pneumatics with a brush, unclogging the dust and stack smoke. That was before the Blimber Watts tower breach. Fifty storeys high, Blimber Watts had been a pioneering design for its time, able to house thousands of clerks, marble atriums and even a sun garden inside its rubberized and canvas skin. But the draughtsmen had got the stress calculations wrong and the water walls had burst, sending the pneumatic structure tumbling down into the clogged streets.

Molly had been in the vents on the thirty-eighth floor when the tower lost cohesion, coming down even faster than it had gone up. Clawing in darkness at the deflating walls as her stomach turned in freefall; a smashing impact, then lying trapped for five days between two leaking water cells, licking at the walls for the stale, dirty liquid. Throwing up in terror, her voice a knife-slicing croak screaming and screaming for help.

She had lost hope of being rescued, lying in the embrace of a pressing crush of rubber. Then she sensed the steamman worker cutting through the building's remains above her. Molly knew she possessed an unnatural affinity for the mechanical

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race, the polished boiler hearts and intricate mechanisms of cogs and silicate prisms calling out to her to be examined, turned over in her fingers, assembled into intricate patterns. She had screwed her eyes shut and willed the worker to hear her thoughts – here, here, down HERE.

Minutes later the silent steamman had peeled back a foot-thick strip of rubber, letting a flood of impossibly bright daylight come gushing in. It stood there silently, an iron statue, until Molly noticed its voicebox had been removed. A gentle nod of its head and the steamman was moving off, as if bloodied, blackened girls crawling out of the ground were an everyday occurrence for the creature of the metal.

How the Beadle had cursed and beaten her to try to get her back into the vents. But the only time she had tried, two other vent girls had to be sent in to drag her trembling, mute form out of the passages.

‘Come on,’ said Rachael. ‘Let’s take the turn down Blackglass Lane; they were putting on a march across Grumblebank when I came to fetch you.’

‘The King?’ said Molly.

‘Better than that, girl. The Special Guard.’

Despite the trouble that was waiting for her back at the workhouse for another job lost, Molly smiled. Everyone loved the Special Guard. Their extreme powers. The handsome cut of their uniform. Days spent at the muscle pits to whet the curves of their athletic build.

The two girls cut across a series of old rookeries, bent and puddled with garbage filth, before emerging on one of the broad clean avenues that ran parallel to Sun Street itself. There, a crowd of eager onlookers were thronging the street, a line of crushers from the local police precinct holding the press back, dark bandoleers of gleaming crystal bullets criss-crossed over their black constable’s uniforms.



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Back down the thoroughfare a column of the Special Guard moved with their trademark sweeping leg march, high boots whip-cracking on the road in unison. The ground seemed to vibrate with their approach.

‘There’s your guardsmen,’ said Molly.

‘And there’s your king,’ added Rachael.

His Majesty King Julius, eighth monarch of the Throne Restored and King of the Jackelians, sat on a cushioned red seat in an open coach and four, staring sadly back at the curious crowds.

Molly gestured at Crown Prince Alpheus sitting to the king’s side, hardly any older than either of the poorhouse girls. ‘He doesn’t look happy.’

‘Why should he be, when his father’s got the waterman’s sickness? His pappy won’t see out another two years as monarch, then the boy’s for the knife.’

Molly nodded. The King’s robes had been subtly tailored to accentuate the fact that both of his arms had been surgically removed, and in time the young prince would no doubt be dragged bawling to the bone-cutter’s table by his Special Guard jailers.

It had been ever thus, since Isambard Kirkhill strode across the land in a sea of blood and pistol smoke to assert parliament’s right of supremacy at the head of the new pattern army. No monarch shall ever raise his arms against his people again.

Five hundred years since the civil war and the House of Guardians were still adhering to the strictures of Isambard Kirkhill, old sabre-side as his enemies had nicknamed him. There was the weekly march to Parliament Square from the palace – the latter little more than an empty marble jail now. The symbolic unchaining of the king’s iron face-gag, then the king would bend down on one knee and assert the House of

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Guardians' right to rule for the people. These days his only witnesses were a few uninterested spectators, a handful of curious foreign visitors and the long line of silent statues of Guardian Electors past.

'Look,' said Molly, pointing behind the carriage. 'Captain Flare.'

Rachael pushed at the costermongers and fish-stall hawkers in front of her to get a better look.

'It is him. Molly, will you look at those muscles? He could crush a regiment of Cassarabian sand riders between them thighs.'

Molly knew that Rachael favoured the lewder penny dreadfuls, adventures that featured the action between the silks of dune-swept harems as much as the ring of sabre steel across a battlefield. But it was true. The commander of the Special Guard was impossibly handsome. None of the penny dreadfuls' cover illustrations had ever done him justice. Captain Flare's cloak drifted behind him like a thing alive, a dancing shadow, his piercing blue eyes sweeping the crowd, making them feel he was staring straight at each of them alone. A flash of light glinted off the captain's restraining neck torc, blinding Molly for a second.

'Hooray the Guard!' An almost hysterical scream from one of the crowd, and as if it were a trigger, the entire multitude took up the shout, cheering and stamping along the broadways. Someone in the crowd started singing 'Lion of Jackals' and soon half the avenue had joined in the bawdy patriotic lyrics.

Molly stood next to Rachael, cheering, a swell of pride rising in her chest. Hooray the Guard indeed. Between the Royal Aerostatical Navy ruling the sky and the powerful and heroic Special Guard on the ground, demolishing any enemy that dared to threaten Jackals, the kingdom was the most powerful force on the continent.

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Other nations would have used that power to build an empire, bully their neighbours into subservience. But not Jackals. Their people suffered no rule of mad kings, power-hungry caliphs or rapacious senators. The quiet, peaceful Jackelians had pulled the teeth of their own would-be overlords and had prospered for centuries – trading, building, and quietly, doggedly innovating. If a Jackelian had a town garden to potter around in, or a village field to snatch a quick afternoon game of four-poles in, their empire was complete.

Other nations had dictator kings, political assassinations, and the heart-tugging wail of starving children and barren fields lying fallow while peasant armies slaughtered each other at the whim of local warlords. Jackals let its over-ambitious fools argue and wag fingers at each other across the House of Guardians.

Other nations had dark gods and wild-eyed prophets that demanded obedience, child mutilation, slavery, and poverty for the people while wealth flowed to an all-powerful priest class. Jackals had its deity-free Circlist philosophy, gentle meditations and a wide network of oratories. A Circlist parson might drop round and request a quick brew of caffeel, but never call for the beating heart of a family's firstborn to be ripped out of its chest.

Every few decades a foreign power would mistake the Jackelians' quiet taste for the rule of law for the absence of ambition. Would mistake a content and isolationist bent for a weak and decadent society. Would come to the conclusion that a nation of shopkeepers might better be put to serving what they had built, made and grown to warriors and bullies. Many enemies had made the assumption that *prefers not to fight* equates to *can't fight and won't fight*. All had been punished severely for it. Slow to rouse, once they were, their foes discovered Jackals was no nation full of bumbling storekeepers,

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greedy mill owners and stupid farm boys. They found a pit of lions, a people with a hard, unruly thuggish streak and no tolerance for bullies – either foreign or raised on Jackals’ own acres. Of course, being the only nation on Earth to possess a supply of celgas had never harmed the kingdom’s standing. Jackals’ unique aerial navy was truly the envy of the world, a floating wall of death standing ready to guarantee her ancient freedoms.

‘Better a knave in Jackals than a prince in Quatérshift’ went the popular drinking song, and right now, caught up in the wild jingoistic crowd, Molly’s heart followed the sentiment. Then she remembered the Beadle waiting for her back at the poorhouse with his stinging cane and her heart briefly sank. Her spirit quickly returned; she found her resolve stiffened as she remembered one of Damson Darnay’s history lessons. Each of them was a gem to be treasured in her now miserable life, but one in particular she recalled with fond clarity, even now, years after the death of the woman who had been like a mother to her.

The lesson had taken the form of a centuries-old letter – a horrified report to the then King of Quatérshift from his ambassador in Jackals, generations before Jackals’ civil war, when most of the continent still suffered under the heel of absolutist regimes. The monarch of the old throne of Jackals had been attending a play at the theatre when the mob took against the performance, booing the actors off the stage, then, noticing the King in the royal box, stoning him too. The stunned Quatérshiftian had described to his own monarch the unbelievable sight of the King’s militia fighting a rearguard action down the street as the rioting mob chased the portly Jackelian ruler away from the burning theatre. How alien to that bewildered ambassador, from a land where compliant serfs would be beaten to death for failing to

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address a noble with respect. But how true to the Jackelian character.

Molly had taken that lesson to heart. She might be an orphan, brought up by an uncaring state, but she would brook no bullying, and she was equal in the eyes of the law to any poorhouse official or Middlesteel laundry owner.

Now, if only the Beadle could see things that way.

The head of the Sun Gate workhouse had an office increasingly at odds with the rest of the poorhouse's shabby buildings, from his shining teak writing desk, through to the rich carpets and the obligatory oil painting of the current First Guardian, Hoggstone, hung behind it all. After Molly realized the Beadle did not seem inclined immediately to start screaming a tirade of abuse at her, the second thing she noticed was the calm presence of the elegant lady seated on his chaise longue. Smart. Quality. Too richly dressed for any inspector of schools. Molly eyed the Beadle suspiciously.

'Now Molly,' began the Beadle, his lazy con-man's eyes blinking. 'Sit down here and I will introduce you to our guest.'

Molly prepared her best barrack-room lawyer's face. 'Yes, sir.'

'Molly, this is Damson Emma Fairborn, one of Sun Gate's most prominent employers.'

The lady smiled at Molly, pushing back at the curl of her blonde bob, streaked by age with a spray of platinum silver now. 'Hello Molly. And do you have a last name?'

'Templar,' said the Beadle, 'for the—'

The lady crooked a finger in what might have been displeasure and amazingly the Beadle fell silent.

'Molly, I am sure you can speak for yourself . . .'

'For the Lump Street temple, where the Aldermen found me abandoned, wrapped in a silk swaddle,' Molly said.

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‘Silk?’ smiled Damson Fairborn. ‘Your mother must have been a lady of some standing to have thrown good silk away. A dalliance with the downstairs staff, or perhaps an affair?’

Molly grimaced.

‘But of course, I am sure you have dwelt on the identity of your parents at some length. There is not much else to occupy the mind in a place like this, after all.’

A sudden shocking thought gripped Molly, but the lady shook her head. ‘No, Molly. I am not she; although I suppose I am of an age where you could be my daughter.’

The Beadle harrumphed. ‘I should warn you, Molly has something of a temper, damson. Or should I say temperament.’

‘To match her wild red hair, perhaps?’ smiled the lady. ‘And who would not, stuck in this damp place? Denied fine clothes, good wine, the company of gallants and a polite hand of whist? I am quite sure I would not find my temperament improved one whit if our positions were reversed.’

The Beadle glared at Molly, then looked at the lady. ‘I don’t—’

‘I believe I have heard enough from you, Beadle,’ said Emma Fairborn. ‘Now then, Molly. Would you do me the favour of bringing me that book over there?’

Molly saw the leather-bound volume she was pointing to on one of the higher of the Beadle’s bookshelves. She shrugged, walked over to the shelf and slid the book out. She blew the dust off the top. Pristine. Some work of philosophy kept for impressing visitors with the weight of the Beadle’s intellect. Then she walked over to where the lady was sitting and passed the work across.

Damson Fairborn gently held Molly’s hand for a second before turning it over and examining it like a gypsy palm reader. ‘Thank you, Molly. I am so glad that your tenure in

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the employ of that Snell woman was brief. Your hands are far too nice to be ruined by bleach.' She placed the book down beside her. 'And you have a good sense of balance for someone with your height. A shade over five and a half feet I would say.'

Molly nodded.

'My dear, you have no idea how many pretty girls I meet who clump around like shire horses at a country fair, or waddle like a duck with the bad fortune to have been dressed in a lead corset. I think I can work with you. Tell me, Molly, have you enjoyed your time here at the house?'

'I have found it . . . somewhat wearisome, damson,' Molly replied.

She seemed amused. 'Indeed, have you? You have quite an erudite turn of phrase for someone raised between these walls.'

'The last director here was a Circlist, Damson Fairborn,' said the Beadle. 'She had the children in classes well past the statutory age, flouting the Relief of the Poor Act.'

'A mind is the hardest thing to improve and the easiest thing to waste,' said the lady. 'And you, Molly. You have received no salary for these labours, I presume?'

'No, damson,' Molly answered. 'It all goes to the Sun Gate Board of the Poor.'

Damson Fairborn nodded in understanding. 'Yes, I am sure I would be amazed at how expensive the ward's Victualling Board can buy in the cheapest kitchen slops. Still—' she looked directly at the Beadle '—I am sure the suppliers have their overheads.'

The Beadle positively squirmed behind his writing desk.

'Well, my dear.' Damson Fairborn adjusted the short silk-print wrap draped around her jacket's shoulders. 'You will do. I think I can pay you a handsome stipend once the poor board's monthly fees have been accounted for.'

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Molly was shocked. If there was an employer who was paying the poorhouse's dole and adding on an extra salary for the boarders, it was a first for the Sun Gate workhouse. The whole rotten idea of the poorhouse was as a source of cheap labour for the ward.

'She's an orphan, mind,' reminded the Beadle. 'She reaches her maturity in a year and then she's a voter. I can only transfer her ward papers to you for twelve months.'

The lady smiled. 'I think after a year with me our young lady's tastes will be expensive enough that she won't wish to return to working for your Handsome Lane concerns.'

Molly followed her new employer out onto the street, leaving the dank Sun Gate workhouse to the Beadle and his minions. The lady had a private cab waiting for her, the horses and carriage as jet-black as the livery of the squat, bullet-headed retainer standing beside them.

'Damson Fairborn,' Molly coughed politely as the manservant swung open the cab door.

'Yes, my dear.'

Molly indicated the high prison-like walls of the poorhouse behind them. 'This isn't the usual recruiting ground for a domestic'

Her new employer looked surprised. 'Why, Molly, I don't intend you for an undermaid or a scullery girl. I thought you might have recognized my name.'

'Your name?'

'Lady Fairborn, Molly. As in my establishment: Fairborn and Jarndyce.'

Molly's blood turned cold.

'Of course,' the lady winked at her heavily muscled retainer, 'Lord Jarndyce is sadly no longer with us. Isn't that so, Alfred?'

'A right shame, milady,' replied the retainer. 'Choked on a piece of lobster shell during supper, it was said.'



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‘Yes, Alfred. That was really rather careless of him. One of the very few occurrences of good living proving harmful to one’s constitution, I should imagine.’

Molly’s eyes were still wide with shock. ‘But Fairborn and Jarndyce is—’

‘A bawdyhouse, my dear. And I, not to place too delicate a sensibility on it, am widely known as the Queen of the Whores.’

The retainer stepped behind Molly, cutting off her escape route down the street.

‘And you, Molly. I think you shall do very nicely indeed as one of my girls.’

Back in the Beadle’s office the Observer faded into the reality of the poorhouse. She was allowed only one intervention, and it had been one of her best. Small. As it had to be. Hardly an intercession at all.

Originally the Beadle had been intending to rent Molly’s ward papers to the large abattoir over on Cringly Corner; but that reality path would have seen Molly returned, dismissed for insubordination, and back in the poorhouse within six weeks. Which would not have been at all beneficial for the Observer and her designs.

It had been so easy to nudge the Beadle’s brain a degree to the side, letting the new plan form in his imagination. Harder to push Emma Fairborn’s steel trap of a mind, but still well within the Observer’s intervention tolerances. The Beadle was sitting behind his desk now, working out how much graft was due in by the end of the week.

The Observer made sure everything was tidy and accounted for in the man’s treacle-thick chemical soup of a mind. Something, a sixth sense perhaps, made the Beadle scratch the nape of his neck and stare directly at where the Observer

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was standing. She increased the strength of her infiltration of his optic nerve, erasing even her background presence, comforting the small monkey brain back into a state of ease. Silver and gold, think about the money. The Beadle shuffled his papers into a neat stack and locked them away in his drawer. It was going to be a good take again this week.

The Observer sighed and faded back out of reality. Sadly, the Beadle was not going to live long enough to purchase that twelfth cottage by the coast to add to his burgeoning property empire. She could have saved him. But then there were some interventions the Observer was glad she was not required to make.