

Excerpt from HIGHFELL GRIMOIRES by Langley Hyde  
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Hanging midair, the gravity-defying vessels called *aetheria* still filled me with awe. Powered by the invisible current of aether, the great floating ships' upper decks supported educational institutions and the wealthiest peerage show homes.

Although I had no iolite lens with which to see it, I knew that the unprocessed aether gusted and rolled around us, scentless and intangible. The current running along the River Wyrd was among the most powerful in Higher Eidoland.

Like navy vessels on fleet review, the great ships pivoted in unison so that their prows faced into the air stream. The massive chains that anchored them to earth glittered with frost.

Gliders, their silk wings glimmering metallically in the sunshine, scudded around the *aetheria* like skiffs.

Higher *aetheria*, outfitted with belowdecks boilers and adorned with promenade-level gardens, held marble institutions of higher learning. Our craft plunged past their stained glass windows, gilded domes, and fluttering pennants. As we descended past the upper *aetheria*'s hulls, palatial residence halls and half-domed astronomical observatories gave way to varnished wooden hulls studded with massive intake fans. These drew in aether along with atmosphere, through wind tunnels lined by copper wires inscribed with aetheric trapping spells.

Steamy exhaust from the turbines gusted around us. It smelled hotly of metal and was edged with an iron tang reminiscent of blood.

Positioned between the mooring chains of higher *aetheria* and caught sometimes in their shadows, the lesser institutions hovered. These were dingier, their gardens less extensive. Although I had often viewed them from above, never in my life had I thought I would step foot on one in any capacity. As we dropped into their midst, anxious determination as well as curiosity coursed through me. I *would* make the best of it.

Finally, wind whipping and roaring around us, the pilot circled one *aetherium* in particular. Absurdly small, like a river trawler, the institution below us had a small brick house flanked by two adjoined halls. From above the buildings formed a letter "H". Whether it stood for Highfell or was merely an architectural accident, I could not say. I saw no garden and no one awaited us on deck.

The airman descended toward the *aetherium*'s prow and landed the craft expertly, catching the arresting wire on the first go 'round and rattling to a stop across the landing deck. Unsnapping myself only a second slower than the airman, I disembarked. As it was a midsummer afternoon, the ice had mostly melted and the footing wasn't treacherous. Since no servants had come to meet us, I helped the airman heave my trunk from behind the leather passenger seat.

We carried the trunk across the landing deck ourselves. Once we'd deposited my luggage behind the catch net, I tipped the airman a shilling. As I tucked my goggles and straps up onto my hat's brim, I saw my welcoming committee approach.

A rotund man, followed by his thin wife and two adult children came forward. The Nobbsnipes, I supposed. Apart from them, only two maidservants and one manservant were present. I had expected there

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to be more of a turn out. At the very least, I had hoped to be introduced to the other teachers. It was a shame. In my school days, usually the teachers would assemble their pupils to greet any new arrival. Seeing a new face had always been reason enough for festivity.

This dismal entourage, in their somberly fine clothes, seemed merely like they were attending the funeral of someone who had not been well liked.

Barnabas Nobbsnipe, the schoolmaster at the head of the subdued family, stepped forward with his hand perched on his round belly and a self-satisfied smile on his face. He favored me with a too-brief bow.

“Lord Franklin, welcome to Highfell Hall.”

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*Langley Hyde first fell in love with steampunk while studying at Oxford University. There she divided her time between reading about alchemy and heresy in Duke Humfrey's Library, and visiting London to gawk at Babbage's Difference Engine. Her hobbies include making wire sculptures, talking to cats, and wearing tiny hats.*