



Retribution Falls

By Chris Wooding

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Sky piracy is a bit out of Darian Frey's league. Fate has not been kind to the captain of the airship *Ketty Jay*—or his motley crew. They are all running from something. Crake is a daemonist in hiding, traveling with an armored golem and burdened by guilt. Jez is the new navigator, desperate to keep her secret from the rest of the crew. Malvery is a disgraced doctor, drinking himself to death. So when an opportunity arises to steal a chest of gems from a vulnerable airship, Frey can't pass it up. It's an easy take—and the payoff will finally make him a rich man.

But when the attack goes horribly wrong, Frey suddenly finds himself the most wanted man in Vardia, trailed by bounty hunters, the elite Century Knights, and the dread queen of the skies, Trinica Dracken. Frey realizes that they've been set up to take a fall but doesn't know the endgame. And the ultimate answer for captain and crew may lie in the legendary hidden pirate town of Retribution Falls. That's if they can get there without getting blown out of the sky.

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Editorial Review

Review

Short-listed for the 2010 Arthur C. Clarke Award

"If Robert Louis Stevenson and Patrick O'Brian had teamed up to write a rollicking fantasy, Chris Wooding's *Retribution Falls* would be the result. Pirates, sky-ships, and golems are just the trappings for a far-flung adventure of stunning imagination and brilliant craftsmanship. I've already booked passage for the next flight of the *Ketty Jay*...long may she sail!"

--James Rollins, New York Times bestselling author of *Altar of Eden*

"Beautifully crafted prose and some remarkably imaginative scenes ...and Wooding's sprawling, multifaceted world and rough-and-tumble action will delight steampunk fans." -*Publisher's Weekly*, starred review

"*Retribution Falls* picks you up, whisks you swiftly and entertainingly along, and sets you down with a big smile on your face." --Joe Abercrombie, author of *The Last Argument of Kings*

"A fast exhilarating read . . . the kind of old fashioned adventure I didn't think we were allowed to write anymore, of freebooting privateers making their haphazard way in a wondrous retro-future world." —Peter Hamilton, author of *The Temporal Void*

"This is a wonderful book." --*New York Times* bestselling author Charlaine Harris

"*Retribution Falls* is an inventive, high-flying adventure full of secrets, sky pirates, and suspense, complete with cocky heroes and daring escapes. Fans of Joss Whedon's *Firefly* will love it." --Christopher Golden, co-author of *The Secret Journeys of Jack London*

"Engaging characters, interesting world, a story that moves -- what more can you ask for?" --Troy Denning, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Star Wars: Fate of the Jedi: Abyss*

"If Robert Louis Stevenson and Patrick O'Brian had teamed up to write a rollicking fantasy, Chris Wooding's *Retribution Falls* would be the result. Pirates, sky-ships, and golems are just the trappings for a far-flung adventure of stunning imagination and brilliant craftsmanship. I've already booked passage for the next flight of the *Ketty Jay*...long may she sail!"--James Rollins, *New York Times* bestseller of *Altar of Eden*

"If masterful plotting were the book's only attribute, then *Retribution Falls* would still be a first-rate read. What makes it exceptional is the psychological insight rare in fast-paced, adventure SF...On every level, *Retribution Falls* is a triumph." --*Guardian* (UK)

"A sky pirate adventure that features quirky characters—including a mechanical golem and a bad-tempered cat—witty dialog, and enough fast-paced action to please fans of swashbuckler fantasy." –*Library Journal*

"If any book can be given its own genre then this would surely fall under the heading of *fun*...and alongside Phillip Pullman's superlative Dark Materials trilogy this is one of the best Steampunk novels out there."
–Fantasy Book Review

"One of the best pieces of fun I've read in a long while...a whip-cracking pace and with characters you care about...If you're looking for a book where the pages just fly in reading, then look no further - this is a great read." –SFFWorld

"So what's not to love in this book - fast action, great characters, great setting and superb one-liners? Highly, highly recommended and another notable SFF novel of 09 for me" –Fantasy Book Critic

"If you are looking for a fun, page-turning scifi read, then *Retribution Falls* is for you. If Joe Abercrombie ever wrote a science fiction book, this is the sort of thing he'd come up with." –Pat's Fantasy Hotlist

"From the dialogue with supremely funny re-joiners to the a world that is so well realized, *Retribution Falls* is a can't miss novel. The fast and furious *Retribution Falls* is a staggeringly and ridiculously good page turner" –Booktionary

"This is an exciting story and the misadventures and foolhardy escapades of this crew are extremely amusing. As in all good pirate stories, terrific battles between ships abound" –*ReadPlus*

"I'd recommend [*Retribution Falls*] to anyone who's after a dose of rip roaring adventure." –Graeme's Fantasy Book Review

"*Retribution Falls* is an excellent novel" --SFCrowsnest

About the Author

Chris Wooding is in his early thirties and has already signed his first Hollywood film deal and won several awards for his writing. He is the author of, amongst others, the Broken Sky series, which has sold over 200,000 copies in the US alone, and The Haunting of Alaizabel Cray, which won the Silver Smarties award. He has travelled extensively, plays bass and guitar and has recorded several albums with various bands and toured in Europe. His books have been published all over the world and translated into 19 languages. He is currently working on two movies with a top Hollywood director.

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Chapter One

Lawsen Macarde-A Question of Probabilities-

Frey's Cutlass-New Horizons

The smuggler held the bullet between thumb and forefinger, studying it in the weak light of the storeroom. He smiled sourly.

"Just imagine," he said. "Imagine what this feels like going through your head."

Grayther Crake didn't want to imagine anything of the sort. He was trying not to throw up, having already disgraced himself once that morning. He glanced at the man next to him, hoping for some sign that he had a plan, some way to get them out of this. But Darian Frey's face was hard and showed nothing.

Both of them had their wrists tied together, backs against the damp and peeling wall. Three armed thugs ensured they stayed there.

The smuggler's name was Lawsen Macarde. He was squat and grizzled, hair and skin greasy with a sheen of sweat and grime, features squashed across a face that was broad and deeply lined. Crake watched him slide the bullet into the empty drum of his revolver. He snapped it shut, spun it, then turned toward his audience.

"Do you think it hurts?" he mused. "Even for a moment? Or is it all over-bang!-in a flash?"

"If you're that curious, try it out on yourself," Frey suggested.

Macarde hit him in the gut, putting all of his considerable weight behind the punch. Frey doubled over with a grunt and almost went to his knees. He straightened with some effort until he was standing again.

"Good point," he wheezed. "Well made."

Macarde pressed the muzzle of the revolver against Crake's forehead and stared at Frey.

"Count of three. You want to see your man's brains all over the wall?"

Frey didn't reply. Crake's face was gray beneath his close-cropped blond beard. He stank of alcohol and sweat. His eyes flicked to the captain nervously.

"One."

Frey showed no signs of reacting.

"I'm just a passenger!" Crake said. "I'm not even part of his crew!" His accent betrayed an aristocratic upbringing that wasn't evident from his appearance. His hair was scruffy, his boots vomit-spattered, his greatcoat half unbuttoned and hanging open. He was near soiling himself with fear.

"You have the ignition code for the Ketty Jay?" Macarde asked him. "You know how to fire her up and get her flying?"

Crake swallowed and shook his head.

"Then shut up. Two."

"Nobody flies the Ketty Jay but me, Macarde. I told you that," Frey said. His eyes flickered restlessly around the storeroom. Cloud- muffled sunlight drifted in through horizontal slits high up on one stone wall,

illuminating rough-hewn hemp sacks, coils of rope, wicked- looking hooks that hung on chains from the ceiling. Chill shadows cut deep into the seamed faces of Macarde and his men, and the air smelled of damp and decay.

"Three," said Macarde, and pulled the trigger.

Click.

Crake flinched and whimpered as the hammer fell on an empty chamber. After a moment, it sank in: he was still alive. He let out a shuddering breath as Macarde took the gun away, then cast a hateful glare at Frey.

Frey's expression was blank. He was a different person from the man Crake had known the night before. That man had laughed as loud as Malvery and made fun of Pinn with the rest of them. He told stories that had them in stitches and drank until he passed out. That man, Crake had known for almost three months. That man, Crake might have called a friend.

Macarde studied the pistol theatrically. "Five chambers. One down. Think you'll be lucky again?" He put the muzzle back to Crake's forehead.

"Oh, please, no," Crake begged. "Please, please, no. Frey, tell him. Stop playing around and just tell him."

"One," said Macarde.

Crake stared at the now-stranger to his right, his eyes pleading. No doubt about it, it was the same man. There were the same wolfishly handsome features, the same unkempt black hair, the same lean frame beneath his long coat. But the spark in his eyes had gone. There was no sign of the ready, wicked smile that usually lurked at the corner of his mouth.

He wasn't going to give in.

"Two."

"Please," he whispered. But Frey just looked away.

"Three."

Macarde paused on the trigger, waiting for a last-moment intervention. It didn't come.

Click.

Crake's heart leaped hard enough to hurt. He let out a gasp. His mouth was sticky, his whole body was trembling, and he desperately wanted to be sick again.

You bastard, he thought. You rot-hearted bastard.

"Didn't think you had it in you, Frey," Macarde said, with a hint of admiration in his voice. He thrust the revolver back into a holster somewhere amid the motley of battered jackets that he wore. "You'd let him die rather than give up the Ketty Jay? That's cold."

Frey shrugged. "He's just a passenger." Crake swore at him under his breath.

Macarde paced around the storeroom while a rat-faced thug covered the prisoners with the point of a cutlass. The other two thugs stood in the shadows: an enormous shaven-headed bruiser and a droop-eyed man wearing a tatty knitted cap. One guarded the only exit, the other lounged against a barrel, idly examining a lever-action shotgun. There were a dozen more like them downstairs.

Crake clawed at his mind for some way to escape. In spite of the shock and the pounding in his head, he forced himself to be rational. He'd always prided himself on his discipline and self-control, which only made the humiliation of the last few moments harder to bear. He'd pictured himself displaying a little more dignity in the face of his own extinction.

Their pistols had been taken after they were found at the inn, snoring drunk at the table. Macarde had taken Frey's beautiful cutlass-my cutlass, Crake thought bitterly-for his own. Now it hung tantalizingly from his belt. Crake noticed Frey watching it closely.

What of Malvery and Pinn? They'd evidently wandered off elsewhere in the night to continue their carousing, leaving their companions to sleep. It was simply bad luck that Macarde had found him and Frey, tonight of all nights. A few more hours and they'd have been out of port and away. Instead, they'd been dragged upstairs-pausing only for Crake to be sick on his own feet-and bundled into this dank storeroom, where an anonymous and squalid death awaited them if Frey didn't give up the ignition codes for his aircraft.

I could be dead, Crake thought. That son of a bitch didn't do a thing to stop it.

"Listen," said Macarde to Frey. "Let's be businessmen about this. We go back, you and I. Worked together several times, haven't we? And even though I came to expect a certain sloppiness from you over the years-late delivery, cargo that wasn't quite what you promised, that sort of thing-you never flat-out screwed me. Not 'til now."

"What do you want me to say, Macarde? It wasn't meant to end up this way."

"I don't want to kill you, Frey," said Macarde in a tone that suggested the opposite. "I don't even want to kill that milksop little pansy over there. I just want what's mine. You owe me an aircraft. I'll take the Ketty Jay."

"The Ketty Jay's worth five of yours."

"Well, consider the difference as the price of me not cutting off your balls and stuffing them in your ears."

"That's fair," conceded Frey.

"That aerium you sold me was bad stuff. Admit it."

"What did you expect for that price?"

"You told me it came straight from the refinery. What you sold me was so degraded it wouldn't have lifted a biscuit, let alone twenty tons of aircraft."

"Sales patter. You know how it is."

"It must have been through the engines of every freebooter from here to the coast!" Macarde growled. "I'd have got better quality stuff siphoning it off the wrecks in a junkyard!"

Crake gave Frey a fleeting look of guilt. "Actually," grinned Frey, "it'd have been about the same."

Macarde's punch came blindingly fast, snapping Frey's head back so it cracked against the wall. Frey groaned and put his hands to his face. His fingertips came away bloody from a split lip.

"Little less attitude will make this all go a lot smoother," Macarde advised.

"Right," said Frey. "Now you listen. If there's some way I can make this up to you, some job I can do, something I can steal, whatever you want . . . well, that's one thing. But you will never get my craft, you hear? You can stuff whatever you like in my ears. The Ketty Jay is mine."

"I don't think you're in much of a position to negotiate," Macarde said.

"Really? 'Cause the way I see it, the Ketty Jay is useless without the ignition code, and the only one who knows it is me. That puts me in a pretty strong position as long as I don't tell you."

Macarde made a terse gesture toward Droop-Eye. "Cut off his thumbs."

Droop-Eye left his shotgun atop the barrel he'd been leaning on and drew a dagger.

"Whoa, wait!" said Frey quickly. "I'm talking compensation. I'm talking giving you more than the value of your craft. You cut off my thumbs and I can't fly. Believe me, you do that and I take the code to my grave."

"I had five men on that craft," said Macarde, as Droop-Eye came over. "They were pulling up out of a canyon. I saw it. The pilot tried to get the lift and suddenly it just wasn't there. Bad aerium, see? Couldn't clear the lip of the canyon. Tore the belly off, and the rest of it went up in flames. Five men dead. You going to compensate me for them too?"

"Listen, there's got to be something you want." He motioned suddenly at Crake. "Here, I know! He's got a gold tooth. Solid gold. Show them, Crake."

Crake stared at the captain in disbelief.

"I don't want a gold tooth, Frey," said Macarde patiently. "Give me your thumbs."

"It's a start!" Frey cried. He glared hard and meaningfully at Crake. "Crake, why don't you show them your gold tooth?"

"Here, let us have a look," Rat said, leaning closer to Crake. "Show us a smile, you little nancy."

Crake took a deep, steadying breath and gave Rat his most dazzling grin. It was a picture pose he'd perfected in response to a mortifying ferrotype taken by the family photographer. After that, he vowed he'd never be embarrassed by a picture again.

"Hey! That's not half bad," Rat commented, peering at his reflection in the shiny tooth. And Crake grinned, harder than he'd ever grinned in his life.

Droop-Eye pulled Frey away from the wall, over to a set of cobwebbed shelves. He swept away a few empty jars with his arm and then forced Frey's bound hands down onto the shelf. Frey had balled his fists and was refusing to extend his thumbs. Droop-Eye hammered him in the kidney, but he still held fast.

"What I'm saying, Macarde, is that we can both come out ahead," Frey argued through gritted teeth. "We'll work off the debt, me and my crew."

"You'll be halfway to New Vardia the second I take my eyes off you," Macarde replied.

"What about collateral? What if I leave you one of the fighters? Pinn has a Skylance; that thing's faster than greased owl shit. You ought to see it go!"

Droop-Eye drove a knee into his thigh, making him grunt, but Frey still wouldn't extend his thumbs. The thug by the door smirked at his companion's attempts to make Frey cooperate.

"Here, listen!" Rat shouted. Everyone stopped and turned to look at him, surprised by the volume of his voice. A strange expression crossed his face, as if he was puzzled to find himself the center of attention. Then it disappeared beneath a dawning revelation.

"Why don't we let them go?" he suggested.

Macarde gave him a reptilian glare. "What?" he said slowly.

"No, wait, hear me out," said Rat, with the attitude of one caught up in an idea so brilliant that it would require careful explanation to his benighted audience. "I mean, killing 'em won't do no good to us. They don't look like they've got a shillie to their name anyways. If we let 'em go, they could, you know, spread the good word and stuff: 'That Lawsen Macarde is a reasonable man. The kind of man you can do business with.' "

Macarde had been steadily reddening as Rat's speech went on, and now his unshaven jowls were trembling with fury. Droop-Eye and Bruiser exchanged wary glances. Neither of them knew what had possessed their companion to pipe up with his opinion, but they both knew the inevitable outcome. Macarde's hand twitched toward the hilt of Frey's cutlass.

"You should listen to the man," said Crake. "He talks a lot of sense."

Macarde's murderous gaze switched to Crake. Absurdly, Crake was still smiling. He flashed his toothy grin at Macarde now, looking for all the world like some oily salesman instead of a man facing his imminent demise.

But then Macarde noticed something. The anger drained from his face and he craned in to look a little closer.

"That's a nice tooth," he murmured.

Yes, keep looking, you ugly bag of piss, Crake thought to himself. You just keep looking.

Macarde's eyes glazed over, mesmerized. Crake directed every ounce of his willpower at the smuggler. Your man's idea isn't so bad, when you think about it. A show of generosity now will only increase your standing in the eyes of your customers. They'll come flocking with their deals, offering the best cuts for the privilege of working with you. You'll own this town!

But Macarde was smarter than Rat. The tooth worked only on the weak- minded. He was resisting; Crake could see it on his face. Even bewitched as he was by the tooth, Macarde sensed that something was amiss.

A chill spread through Crake's body, something icier and more insidious than simple fear. The tooth was draining him. Hungover and weak as he was, he couldn't keep up the fight for long, and he'd already used his best efforts on Rat.

Give it up, he silently begged Macarde. Just give it up.

Then the smuggler blinked, and his gaze cleared. He stared at Crake, shocked. Crake's grin faded slowly.

"He's a daemonist!" Macarde cried, then pulled the pistol from his holster, put it to Crake's head, and pulled the trigger.

Click.

Macarde was as surprised as Crake was. He'd forgotten that he'd loaded his pistol with only a single bullet. There was an instant's pause, then everything happened at once.

Frey's cutlass flew out of Macarde's belt, leaping ten feet across the room, past Droop-Eye and into the captain's waiting hands. Droop- Eye's final moments were spent staring in incomprehension as Frey drove the cutlass double-handed into his belly.

Macarde's bewilderment at having his cutlass stolen by invisible hands gave Crake the time he needed to gather himself. He drove a knee hard into the fat man's groin. Macarde's eyes bulged and he staggered back a step, making a faint squealing noise like a distressed piglet.

His hands still bound, Crake wrestled the revolver from Macarde's beefy fingers just as Rat shook off the effects of the tooth and drew his own cutlass back for a thrust. Crake swung the gun about and squeezed the trigger. This time, the hammer found the bullet. It discharged point-blank in Rat's face, blowing a geyser of red mist from the back of his skull with a deafening bang. He tottered a few steps on his heels and collapsed onto a heap of rope.

Macarde was stumbling toward the door, unwittingly blocking Bruiser's line of fire. As the last thug fought to get an angle, Frey dropped his cutlass, darted across the room, and scooped up the lever-action shotgun that Droop-Eye had left on the barrel. Bruiser shoved his boss behind him to get a clear shot at Crake and succeeded only in providing one for Frey, who unloaded the shotgun into his chest with a roar.

In seconds, it was over. Macarde had gone. They could hear him running along the landing outside, heading downstairs, shouting for his men. Frey shoved the shotgun into his belt and picked up his cutlass.

"Hold out your hands," he said to Crake. Crake did so. The cutlass flickered, and his bonds were cut. He tossed the cutlass to Crake and held out his own hands.

"Now do me."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Sharon Garcia:

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Micah Best:

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