

TAKE BACK THE SKIES

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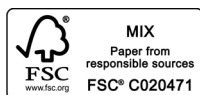
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Rain fell lazily from charcoal-coloured clouds as Catherine Hunter sprinted through darkening streets, her long hair tied in a tight braid and tucked beneath a black knitted cap. Her thick woollen coat and black work trousers disguised her gender quite nicely. She was practically unrecognisable; only the people who knew her well would have been able to tell who she was.

A faint smile tugged at her lips as she reached the familiar tree beside the high stone wall that surrounded the area in which she lived. It took barely any effort to swing herself up into its branches, the knots worn into footholds by constant use. With practised ease, she scrambled up as high as she could manage, edging on to an outstretched branch that just brushed the wall's peak. From there it was just a short jump over the wall, her thud upon landing muffled by the grass. Taking no longer than a second to regain her balance, she resumed running, diving into a gap at the base of a bush. The fence panel behind it was open, as she'd left it, and she crawled through without a care for the mud on her clothes. Her father would never see them.

Flitting across the garden to the back door, she pulled a

pin from her hair and slid it into the lock, opening it effortlessly. Leaving her boots at the very back of the hall closet, she shut the door soundlessly behind her, hurrying in socked feet towards the stairs. It was her habit to be silent, though she knew she was unlikely to draw her father from his office. Catherine would rather not risk it; the punishment for sneaking out was one she didn't like to think about.

After a brief detour to her bedroom to change into more appropriate clothing, Catherine wandered down to the living room, pulling her hair loose as she did so. She was unsurprised to see the newscast screen on in the corner; rarely did her father turn it off, even if he was nowhere near it. She sank on to the plush grey carpet, pulling her knees up to her chest and trying to regulate her breathing. Her father probably wouldn't want her to join him for dinner, but if he did decide to summon her and she gave herself away by looking out of breath, she could expect to be unable to sit down for at least a week.

She sighed to herself as upbeat music began to blare from the newscast screen and another recruitment broadcast played out. She wished that, just once, they might show something other than the war. Yes, she understood that the war with Mericus was important and people wanted to know what was going on – but didn't people also want to know what was going on in Siberene, or how the storms were in the East?

'Your child will be one of many, expertly trained to protect their country,' the cast told her in a proud, tinny voice. She sighed once more, tightly hugging her knees. Had she

been a common child she would have been one of those sent to fight so the adults could stay behind and keep the country from crumbling. She wasn't sure whether to be thankful for her birth, or dismayed by it. Surely even war was better than the life of pseudo-freedom she had now. No amount of sneaking out to roam the streets could change the fact that she was trapped by her father's demands and expectations.

Gears whirled and she looked up to see the family servant – a mecha she had affectionately named Samuel – walking jerkily into the room, a tray of food in his claw-like hand.

'Is Father not eating dinner with me, Sam?' she asked, standing to accept the tray. The purple-white glow in Sam's eyes dimmed.

'No, Miss Catherine. Master Nathaniel is working,' he answered in his gravelly voice. Nathaniel was *always* working. Not that Catherine minded, as she liked being able to eat without being interrogated or insulted.

Sam reached out a thick bronze arm to straighten the silk throw over the back of the sofa, puffs of pale purple steam spilling from the thin chimney on his shoulder in time with the mechanical tick of his metal insides.

'And Mother?' she asked, setting her plate on the low table and sitting on the floor to eat.

'Mistress Elizabeth is sleeping.'

Her mother was always sleeping these days. Sleeping, crying or having a shaking fit. Her father kept telling her that the doctors were doing their best, but she couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a doctor at the house.

They had probably given up, just like her father, and were waiting for Elizabeth Hunter to die.

‘Thank you, Samuel. You may leave.’

Catherine half-heartedly forked potatoes into her mouth. From the living room, there was a very good view of the shipyard, second only to the view from her bedroom. She spent a lot of time staring at the shipyard, watching skyships lifting gracefully into the air with canvas wings outstretched, the propellers beneath giving enough momentum for the ships to quickly latch on to the fierce updraughts that wound through the docks. How she wished to fly in a skyship: the freedom, the boundless space, with no expectations from anyone but herself and her crew. The ability to travel to countries she only dreamed of seeing, meeting new people and immersing herself in different cultures . . .

But that was all a fantasy.

She was destined – as her father had reminded her many times – to marry a high-born man, and produce many strong, healthy little boys and beautiful, gentle little girls to continue the family line. Though her father educated her like he would a son, that didn’t extend to learning about the family business as a proper heir should. She was to serve her husband in every way, obey his orders, and swear fealty to the Anglyan government – just as her mother had. No one asked *her* whether she wanted to swear fealty, or raise lots of children, or even marry a respectable man, she thought resentfully. What if she wanted to marry a scoundrel? Gods, how she wished she could be a commoner! She would give up some luxuries for freedom of choice –

‘Are you watching those silly ships again, Catherine?’

She jumped at the familiar sharp voice, almost spilling gravy down her blouse. Turning, Catherine tried not to grimace upon seeing her father’s tall, imposing form in the doorway, his jaw set and his dark blue eyes stern.

‘Yes, Father. And they’re not silly! They’re beautiful,’ she insisted petulantly, for once, sounding much younger than her fourteen years.

Her father laughed coldly.

‘Rusting piles of gears and timber, that’s all they are. You’d best remove all that fanciful dreaming from your head now. It won’t get you very far.’

Catherine didn’t say anything; she knew better than to argue by now.

‘I need to tell you something,’ Nathaniel declared, and she refrained from rolling her eyes. Storms forbid her father talk to her just because he wanted to.

‘You will be accompanying me to the dockside office tomorrow morning. I have a meeting with Thomas to discuss cutting rations, and he wishes you to be present.’

‘Of course, Father,’ she agreed, trying to hide her distaste. The only reason Thomas Gale wanted her there was to discuss her betrothal to his loathsome son Marcus. He was an arrogant, bull-headed boy whom she despised with every fibre of her being, but her opinion mattered little. It was a good match from a political perspective and her own feelings were irrelevant.

‘Good. Wear your best dress, I want you presentable,’ her father instructed, eyeing with distaste her plain white blouse and tatty leather breeches. ‘I intend to formally offer the

betrothal contract, though I can't submit it as you're not yet a woman.'

Catherine nodded dutifully, thanking her lucky stars for her late development, and Nathaniel left the room, no doubt to go back to his office and continue working. Sometimes she wondered if he ever actually slept.

On the screen, a war report followed yet another recruitment cast, and she paused to listen.

'Massacre by Merican soldiers at an Erovan medical centre, no survivors. Five hundred dead.'

She felt suddenly nauseous. How could things like this be happening to Erovan civilians? There were only a few leagues of raging ocean and a single small storm barrier between Anglya and Erova, and the barrier had been there for as long as anyone could remember. Navigating the thicker clouds and tightly grouped whirlwinds was child's play to most pilots. Erova was closer than any other country, and took two days of flight at the most to reach, yet Catherine seemed so far removed from the troubles there. Not for the first time, she felt helpless. She wished that she were older, that she were stronger, that she could get out from under her father's thumb and do something to help. All too often she saw people gathering at the shipyard, dressed in combat uniform and boarding a military skyship. Boys and girls as young as thirteen stood shoulder to shoulder, led by stern guards who looked to be older than fifty. She yearned to be among them. Those brave soldiers were the only reason Anglya was safe from Merican attack.

She turned the newscast screen off and left the room, wandering to her mother's bedroom. Knocking, she nudged

the heavy door open, her eyes adjusting to the darkened room. A lamp flickered at the bedside table.

‘Mother?’ she called softly.

‘Catherine, dear,’ a feeble, whispery voice breathed in reply, surprising Catherine. It wasn’t often she found her mother awake and coherent. She smiled, crossing to the bed.

‘How are you feeling?’ she asked quietly, clambering up on to the soft bed and peering into the cocoon of quilts to see her mother’s small face, clouded eyes staring dazedly up at her. Elizabeth’s skin was pale and papery, and her once shining golden hair was dull and prematurely grey, but the barest hint of a smile tugged at her colourless lips as she looked up at her only child.

‘No better or worse than usual,’ said Elizabeth, and Catherine bit her lip. That was always her mother’s answer. ‘How are *you*, dearest?’

‘Father wants to betroth me to Marcus Gale,’ she announced, scowling.

Elizabeth’s smile faded.

‘When you were but a baby, and I was in better health, I used to talk of betrothing you to a beautiful little boy who would grow up to be a great man. But alas, he’s gone, as is his mother . . .’ Her voice trailed off and she stared wistfully at the familiar photo on the nightstand. It showed Elizabeth as a younger, healthier woman, with a beautiful blonde woman at her side. Both were dressed in exquisite gowns. The other woman was Queen Mary Latham, and the picture had been taken at the ball celebrating her son’s seventh birthday. It was one of the last photographs taken of the woman before the entire royal family disappeared.

Before the war escalated and everything started to go downhill.

As Catherine was about to leave Elizabeth to rest, her mother spoke again with unexpected force. ‘Don’t let your father decide your future, Catherine! I let my father decide mine, and while I got a lovely daughter out of it . . .’ She didn’t need to finish her sentence. ‘Your heart is yours and yours only to give away, and one day, you will find the man you wish to have it, and he will give you his. That man does not have to be Marcus Gale.’

Was her mother telling her to defy her father? How could she? She was the sole heir to the Hunter fortune – she might as well burn herself from the family tree.

‘You are a brave girl, Catherine, and destined for greater things than becoming Marcus Gale’s wife,’ her mother said, her grey eyes clear for once. ‘Your father is . . . a difficult man. He doesn’t always understand how his actions affect others. And he certainly doesn’t expect a woman to have a mind of her own, especially his daughter. Stand up for yourself, sweetheart, and make your own way in the world. Perhaps a shock like that would teach him an important lesson.’

Catherine’s own eyes sparkled with understanding and excitement.

‘But what about you?’ she asked, drawing a faint smile to her mother’s lips.

‘It is a parent’s job to look after their child, not the other way around. Don’t worry about me, dear.’

‘Mother, you do know how much I love you, don’t you? More than anything,’ Catherine told her firmly, leaning in

to press a gentle kiss to her mother's brow and swallowing back the lump in her throat.

'And I love you, my dear one. But you're almost a young woman now, and you're beginning to need your mother less and less. Just . . . teach that father of yours that he's not lord of the storms, would you?' Elizabeth replied with a look of fierce determination, which Catherine matched, rendering the family resemblance astonishing.

'Oh, trust me. He won't know what hit him.'

Catherine stayed with her mother until she fell asleep, then turned off the lamp and crept out. Knowing her father was in his office, she ran silently along the corridor and up the stairs to her room. She loved having the room at the very top of the house; if she imagined hard enough, she could pretend the rest of the house didn't exist.

'Hello, Samuel,' she said, finding the mecha in her room, making her bed.

'Good evening, Miss Catherine. Can I assist you in any way?' he asked tonelessly.

She wished she was good enough to program complex emotions into him, but despite all her tinkering down in the basement when her father was out, she wasn't yet anywhere near that level.

'No, thank you, Sam. You can, however, swear not to tell my father what I'm doing.' Technically, Samuel was meant to obey her father over her, as he was head of the family, but as far as the mecha comprehended the feelings of like and dislike, he disliked Nathaniel. Like the few aristocrats who could afford a mecha, Catherine's father treated Sam as

nothing more than a lump of metal: useful, yet unimportant and unworthy of courtesy. Nathaniel owned a mecha merely as a mark of status, and would have preferred human servants if they weren't looked upon as the cheaper alternative. Catherine, though, had learned from her mother that even mechas deserved kindness and respect. Besides, having taken Sam apart and put him back together countless times, she knew there was a lot more to him than just gears and chains. Fuelled by tyrium, there was more technology involved in his design than in most full-sized skyships. That was half the reason mechas were so rare and expensive.

'What is it that I must not tell Master Nathaniel?' Samuel asked her.

Opening her wardrobe she pulled out the biggest bag she owned. Then she balled up a shirt and breeches, along with some undergarments, and stuffed them in the bag. She rummaged through her bedside drawers for a pair of scissors and the little money she had stashed away and hid those under the clothing.

'I'm running away,' she declared defiantly. 'I refuse to be married off to that awful Gale boy. Tomorrow I'm going to the shipyard to stow away.'

'Indeed, Miss Catherine. I shall endeavour to keep your secret.' Samuel sounded, though she knew it was impossible, somewhat forlorn.

'Oh, Sam, I wish you could come with me!' she said, reaching up to run a finger over the ornate Erovan festival mask covering Sam's 'brain'. She hated the mask, but her father thought that having so many gears visible was unsightly. 'But I can't take you. The common people don't

have mecha servants so you'd be an obvious giveaway that I'm government-born. You do understand, don't you?

'I do, Miss Catherine. I believe the correct response would be to wish you good fortune in your escape.' Smiling, she leaned up and pressed a kiss to the cold porcelain cheek.

'I'll come back for you, one day. When things are different. I shan't forget you, Samuel,' she declared, letting her gaze slide to the hand-drawn map pinned to her bedroom wall. The only reason she was allowed it was because her father wanted her to be aware of each and every bit of land Anglya ruled over; the land that seemed to be decreasing with every passing month. Once upon a time, Anglya had ruled the whole lot peacefully: each country had its own royal family and government, as they still did, but Anglya's royal family had been at the very head of things. That all changed when Mericus tried to claim Erova for itself. That had been the breaking point; since then, it seemed every country had decided to fight to break free of Anglyan rule. Catherine had been born in the midst of the war, and had no knowledge of what life was like before, but she at least remembered a time when the monarchy was in place. Before her father had been running things, when Collection hadn't even been an option.

Dashing over to the large glass half-dome that was the window of her bedroom, she hauled herself up on to the small window seat, pressing her nose to the glass and staring out over the city. She could see almost all of it from her room. The sun was setting, bathing everything in a purple-gold glow through the rain. Lamps twinkled from atop high posts in the city centre, lighting the way for those still going

about their business. Excitement bubbled at the thought that tomorrow *she* would be part of the real world for good. Maybe she could catch a skyship to Siberene, or even Dalivia. Anywhere that wasn't Anglya.

Outside the government district the city was a sorry-looking place, dirty and rusting, and Catherine knew it was full of painfully thin children and parents scraping by to survive. She'd heard the countryside wasn't much better. All the food grown there was taken by the government and rationed, the excess sold at prices most people couldn't afford. Aside from the farmers, many country folk worked long hours in the mines, gathering tyrium for the government to sell.

It made Catherine sick to think of her privileged place in this world. Merely by being born a Hunter, she had secured a life of relative comfort, a high-born life for which most of the population must surely hate her. Ever since the monarchs disappeared and the government took over rule of the country, a deep loathing had grown in the hearts of the commoners for anyone born to aristocracy, regardless of how much influence they had in government. They understood that the government was doing its best to end the war quickly, but aristocrats were exempt from Collection, and for most people that alone was enough to breed hate. It must be heartbreaking, Catherine supposed, having every child but your eldest taken from you soon after they turned thirteen. On Collection days with low numbers, even the eldest child was taken from some of the poorer families, and the government wasn't above ignoring birth records to take children who were younger. Some families tried to avoid the trauma of Collection by only having one child. But

storms help you, if you were an orphan, or a street rat; you stood no chance of escape.

‘No more,’ she muttered to herself, her gaze steeling in determination as she looked at the shipyard. ‘I won’t sit back and let things happen any more.’

As she spoke a government skyship rose into the air, wings outstretched and tilted to catch the wind, pale violet smoke billowing from the engine pipes, the stern propeller unfolding to give it a boost away from the landing deck, into the nearest updraught. The Anglyan flag waved proudly from the secondary mast. No doubt it was heading to Erova, to fill the front lines with more unfortunate young souls destined to die.

The shipyard was huge. It had to be, given the size of some of the ships – and to allow enough space for each ship to unfurl its wings without tangling with its neighbours. With some larger trade ships standing twice the size of her house, which was one of the biggest houses in Breningarth, the shipyard was practically a city in itself.

‘Miss Catherine, you should retire, it is past sunset,’ Samuel said, interrupting her thoughts. She pulled away from the window, hopping back down to the floor. As Samuel went to get the lights, she changed into her nightgown and crawled under the thick blankets.

‘Goodnight, Sam,’ she murmured as he extinguished the last lamp, pitching the room into darkness but for the glow of light behind his eye lenses.

‘Have a pleasant resting period, Miss Catherine.’ As Sam left her room, she turned over and buried her head in the pillow, letting out a long breath. There was no way she was going to be able to sleep tonight.

2

Pale sunlight woke Catherine the next morning, for sleep had come, eventually. Remembering her plans, she grinned widely and stared up at the ceiling. If all went well, that had been the last time she would sleep in this bed. Finally, she pulled herself out of the warm sheets, opened her wardrobe and found her best dress. It was a gaudy purple monstrosity consisting mostly of petticoats upon petticoats, with silver lace at the cuffs and collar, as well as the trim of the corset, and masses of elaborate embroidery. The bodice was too tight and the fabric uncomfortably itchy. She hated it. She took the dress into the bathroom, where Sam had already drawn her bath. Her mind on her plans for the day, Catherine slid into the hot water. The hardest part would be giving her father the slip . . .

Later, she gathered the skirt of her dress so she could make her way downstairs to the kitchen. That was one reason she disliked dresses with huge skirts; they were completely impractical for just about everything fun. You couldn't run, or climb, and you had to be constantly aware of where your skirt was and whether you were accidentally showing more skin than was deemed appropriate.

Trousers were far better, but, of course, ladies didn't wear trousers.

'Good morning, Father.' She walked into the kitchen, every bit the perfect, dutiful daughter.

Dressed in an impeccable navy three-piece suit, his greying brown hair combed to the side and his sideburns neatly trimmed, her father was already eating porridge, and Catherine could see a generous bowl waiting on the table for her. If there was one thing the country had in abundance, despite the food rations, it was porridge.

'Good morning, Catherine. Can you not do something with your hair? It looks like a bird's nest,' he snapped.

'I had a bath and it's still drying. I'll sort it after breakfast.' He hummed in disapproval, but didn't say anything, looking back down at the newspaper spread over the table beside his bowl.

'Anything in the news?' she asked politely.

'Nothing unusual. Another battalion has fallen in Erova. There's going to be another Collection soon.'

Catherine felt a shiver go down her spine. She loathed Collection day. The screams and cries of parents could be heard for hours after the soldiers left.

'Are there even any children left to be Collected?' she asked, trying to mask her horror. Every time she went into the lower city, there seemed to be fewer and fewer children about. She feared there would soon be none left at all.

'Another twenty more have turned thirteen since the last Collection,' her father said dismissively. 'It's low, but it's better than nothing. Besides, we shan't need many more – if

all goes well, the war should end before long. Now go and comb your hair. We're meeting Thomas at nine.'

Catherine hiked up her skirts and ran back up to her room, pondering her father's unexpected words. What had changed? Was the war truly coming to an end after all this time?

Swiftly she set about untangling the mess that was her long brown hair. The resulting plait was a little rough and uneven, and she knew her father would complain, but he would have to live with it.

'Hurry up, Catherine!' Nathaniel called impatiently.

Catherine fastened her favourite silver-buckled boots, choosing comfort over fashion – her father wouldn't be looking too hard at her feet – then hoisting her bag over her shoulder, she rushed back down to meet her father in the entryway.

She watched his eyes trail over her less than perfect hair.

'I suppose you'll have to do. Let's hope Thomas will forgive your appearance,' he muttered, lifting his satchel over his shoulder. Stomach churning anxiously, Catherine followed without a glance back at her home of nearly fifteen years, not wanting to question even for a second her decision to leave.

Catherine braced herself against a metal bar protruding from the floor of the carriage as the tram jerked to a noisy halt in the station at the heart of the city. Once sleek and near-soundless, years of neglect had made the trams rusty and unsteady. People tried to avoid using them if they could help it, but for some journeys there was no alternative.

Apparently, with the war going on, the government had better things to spend money on than maintaining public transport. Her father was mostly to blame; he was the one in charge of domestic issues.

Nathaniel herded her out on to the platform, where they were immediately assaulted with the sounds and smells of the city. The rain had stopped, but it was still cold enough for Catherine to feel a chill through the layers of her dress, and she found herself wishing she'd brought a coat.

The streets of Breningarth were alive with people, bustling past the rundown buildings and avoiding the large puddles that spanned the roads. This close to the outer city, half the shops had gone out of business years ago due to lack of both interest and stock. On street corners poorly dressed men sold government-produced newspapers or food from small carts, women aired laundry and sold clothes, and a few children darted like lightning from one stall to the next, slipping goods into their pockets on the way. Catherine, always on the alert, hid a grin as one boy stole the expensive pocket watch from her father's coat. His indigo-smudged face showed surprise when he realised she'd seen what he'd done. She winked at him rather than telling her father, and he sprinted away before she could change her mind.

Her boots clicked against the dirty cobbled street, and she couldn't help but notice how people backed away as she and Nathaniel approached, crossing to the other side of the street to avoid them. Catherine's dress immediately set her out as government, and most people would recognise Nathaniel Hunter from the public newscasts that were

constantly shown on the screens in pubs and squares; he wasn't a popular man. Catherine followed her father past an entrance to the shipyard. The busiest place in the city, its noise was almost deafening, and the smell of burning tyrium was heavy in the air, a faint purple tinge tainting the clouds above. Catherine loved it.

The dockland government building was still several streets away, towering over the buildings around it, and Catherine hung back, heart pounding, as her father proceeded. It was now or never. If she could just get to the bustling shipyard, she would be free. She crouched as if refastening her bootlace, looking up through her fringe to make sure her father had carried on walking. In fact, he had quickened his pace; he hated being close to the shipyard as it was full of commoners. He often complained to Catherine that people of government status should not have to interact with the lower levels of society.

Seizing her moment, she straightened up and slipped down a narrow, empty side street between a pub and a bakery. Glancing both ways, Catherine opened her handbag, pulling out the breeches and tugging them on hastily under her dress. Struggling slightly to unlace the back of her bodice, her fingers shaking with exhilaration, she managed to wriggle her way out of the dress and pull her shirt over her head. She stuffed her money purse into the crotch of her breeches, knowing it would be safest there.

The only thing left in her bag was the pair of scissors she'd packed. She held them up, sliding her plait between the blades, and nearly cut her finger off as she heard footsteps nearby. She spun round with her heart in her throat.

No one was there that she could see, but she had to get a move on.

Taking a steadying breath, she tried again, feeling little resistance as the sharp steel cut through the top of the thick brown braid. Her neck itched as short strands brushed the nape. She threw the plait down a nearby drain and left the dress and scissors in the bag, dumping it against the wall. She hoped that some lucky soul would find the contents and sell them. Running her hands through her unevenly cropped hair, she prayed it looked boyish enough that no one would comment. Her chest was easily hidden under the baggy grey blouse.

‘I’m too clean,’ she murmured, looking down at her pale hands and pristine shirt. All the children she’d seen near the shipyard were covered in dirt and tyrium smudges. The look of the ground below her feet made Catherine shudder, but she muddled her fingers regardless, smearing her shirt and breeches. Lifting her hands to her face, she wiped across her brow and cheeks, her eyes and mouth shut tight. A shiver went down her spine at the slick, wet feeling on her skin, and she determinedly ignored the smell. Finally, she spread the dirt through her hair so the dark strands stuck out haphazardly. Disguise now in place, she ran on along the alley, her heart thumping furiously against her ribs. She had done it! She had escaped her father. She was free.

It didn’t take Catherine long to gain access to the shipyard – a quick sprint across the square and ten minutes of hiding behind crates, waiting for the guards to pass. Once she was in, she blended easily into the crowd of workers.

Her eyes were as round as coins as she wandered through the organised chaos of the shipyard. Burly men hauled enormous crates on deck with such ease that they might have been throwing pillows, while small boys scurried from ship to ship, fetching rope and gears and whatever else their captains asked of them, ducking the occasional wave of seawater that towered over the edge of the docks. Many of the docked skyships were vast government vessels, squeaky clean and resplendent in their military colours, banners flying proudly; others were authorised trade ships, gigantic and well-travelled, with huge canvas and metal wings furled at their sides. The number of other ships she could count on one hand; it was near impossible to get a permit for pleasure travel these days.

Steering well clear of the rows of government ships, Catherine made her way past the trade ships. Suddenly, she paused. A skyship at the end of the port had caught her eye. While it was still bigger than her house, it looked as if it were too small to be a trade ship. Its design was beautiful, if somewhat mismatched, with gleaming hazel boards and shiny bronze struts. Cream canvas wings were folded tightly to its sides and the mast was flagless, but the lowered sails were a matching cream colour, rippling slightly in the breeze. Gold calligraphy was scrawled neatly across the bow – *Stormdancer*, it read. The name seemed fitting. She imagined that such a small skyship would dance through even the harshest storms as easily as a master of ballet. Her breath caught, and she instantly knew which ship she was going to board. It was only a matter of how to go about it.

As she moved closer she saw a man sat straddling the boom, working at the rigging. *That* was going to make things difficult. She crept as close as she dared to where the ship's narrow gangplank met the dock, looking out from her hiding place between some large crates. The man had to head below deck sometime!

Her feet had begun to fall asleep before he hopped neatly down and dropped to his knees, opening the trap to slip below deck. Yes! This was her chance. Darting silently up the gangplank, she stepped as quietly as she could on to the ship's deck. Clothes were strung up over a line to dry, and she smiled at seeing a dress. There was at least one woman on the ship; surely she couldn't turn away a homeless child?

Catherine lifted the trap, sighing in relief when the narrow corridor below proved to be empty. She leaned up against the ladder to pull the trap closed and jumped down, landing with a quiet clatter on the metal floor. The inside of the ship was as mismatched as the outside: bronze and steel struts in the walls and floor were interspaced with the occasional section of gleaming wooden panels. The owners genuinely cared about their ship, and it showed.

Creeping as quietly as possible through the short corridors, peering into doors to find a hiding place, she was disheartened to discover only small, packed storage rooms and the main control room. As much as she longed to stay and marvel over the control room and its many dials and levers, she knew she had to hide before someone came back. There was another manhole at the end of the corridor and she dropped straight down it, ignoring the ladder.

There were more doors on this floor, which was U-shaped. Behind the first door was a washroom with a porcelain bath, and the door beside that was the loo. Further down was a wooden door stained with tyrium. Curious, Catherine tried the handle and the door swung open. A narrow bed was shoved against one wall, the patchwork sheets all in a mess, and beside it was a desk covered in blue-print papers and scrawled notes, weighted in place by twists of pipe and wire. A pair of chunky knee-high leather boots rested on the floor beside the bed, and a thick fleece-lined jacket with a high collar hung on the back of the chair at the desk. This was clearly a man's room.

It seemed as good a hiding place as any, so she shut the door behind her, eyes wandering over the messy blueprint stuck to the back of the door. For the life of her, she couldn't decipher its purpose.

She looked around the room for an even smaller place to hide and pulled open the doors of a large oak wardrobe that was bolted to the wall and floor. Heart racing, she pushed aside a heap of clothes at the base of the wardrobe, squeezing herself right into the corner. Covering herself with a long wool coat, she hoped she looked just like another pile of clothes. Catherine laughed shakily to herself. She wrapped her arms around her legs, and leaned her chin on her knees. All she could do now was wait.