Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

opening extract from

Storm Thief

written by

Chris Wooding

published by

Scholastic

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

PART ONE: THE SEABIRD

1.1

The seabird slid through the black sky beneath the blanket of cloud, its feathers ruffling fitfully as it was buffeted by the cold and changing winds.

The ocean was the colour of slate. It bulged and warped in angry swells that consumed one another. Above, spectral light flickered within the thunderheads, and the air boomed. A steady rain fell, slipping off the seabird's oiled feathers in scattered trails of droplets as it banked and flapped.

It was lost. Somewhere on its solitary journey towards the breeding grounds, its sense of navigation had failed it. A magnetic storm was stroking the upper atmosphere, throwing its instinctive guidance systems into disarray. The oppressive cloud, which had not dispersed for three days now, had swallowed the sun and robbed the seabird of its only visible point of reference. It was alone, gliding over an endless expanse of steely waves, and completely without direction.

The bird was of a hardy breed, a species which had evolved for long flights without rest. Their migration took them many days coast to coast, and they never stopped flying in all that time. There were beasts in the sea, toothed leviathans and quick, nimble, biting fish that attacked in swarms and would pull them under if they descended to the surface. The open ocean was too vast to provide reliable feeding on their trip, either. So they gorged themselves in the weeks before their flight, and they slept on the wing.

A sudden squall hit, blowing the seabird aside. It adjusted to compensate, the wind rippling violently across the short white down of its smooth head and along the

feathers of its wings and tail. The horizon had faded, sea and sky merging into one bleak emptiness, obscured by curtains of moisture drooling from grumbling clouds overhead.

It had endured the storm for a long while now, but for how long it could not have known: there seemed to be no passage of time in this howling, skirling void. The seabird was aware only of the wind against its body, the constant need to move onward. These were its only concerns.

Until, impossibly, it found land.

At first it was a grey mass nearly indistinguishable from its surroundings, but as it neared it began gradually resolving out of the rain. The tired traveller angled towards it. It was not troubled by the presence of land where there should be no land; nor did it care that it could not have crossed half the ocean yet, and so it could be nowhere near the breeding grounds it sought. Neither matter registered in the seabird's mind. Land meant shelter.

The shadow loomed as the seabird battled through the storm. It widened and rose, separating into detail, emerging from the bitter rain like the blunt prow of some gargantuan ship. Colossal cliffs, pocked with abandoned dwellings, were topped with sheer walls of riveted and welded metal and weathered stone. Dour outposts blistered along the walls or hunkered atop precarious rock pillars; narrow bridges and winding stairs stretched between them. Distant, skeletal cranes hung against the skyline, creaking in the wind. Thin towers with flanks smooth as jade spidered upward, rising above ugly, squat temples and webbed with walkways of breathtaking delicacy. Vents gushed dismal waterfalls from the base of the perimeter wall, plunging to the sea below to join the foamy churn as the waves battered the feet of the cliffs. And atop the

great plateau, this lonely island risen from the ocean, a thousand thousand tiny lights glimmered, a net of baleful stars in the gloom.

Dark and grim and storm-lashed, the city of Orokos filled the horizon.

The seabird angled downward, between the raking spires and the walkways and the pulleys and scaffold, seeking a place to land and shelter. The unfamiliarity of its surroundings unnerved it. Thunder boomed and rolled across the sky. Flashes of lightning high in the clouds illuminated huge, folded shapes that watched it pass from nooks and eyries. The people of the city called them jagbats, but the seabird knew only what its instinct told it: they were predators, and it was prey.

Wings spread, and something launched itself into the air, soaring towards the seabird.

It sensed the danger and reacted immediately, plummeting towards safety. It chose as its sanctuary a large oval window, hanging open near the pinnacle of a five-sided tower. The tower was scabbed with ancient bedrock near its base and up its sides, as if it had thrust from beneath the earth and into the air; but its upper reaches were naked, and revealed it to be fashioned from red-and-black stone.

The seabird accelerated its dive, and arrowed towards the window. The jagbat chased it down, but it was too fast, and finally the larger creature banked and flapped silently back towards its perch, thwarted.

The seabird, still travelling at maximum speed, shot through the window into the shadows. It saw the obstruction in its path far too late to do anything about it. Instinctively it tried to brake, but it was going too fast. It crashed violently into the side of a metal pipe with a cracking of its hollow bones, and fell out of the air.

The dreary glow from outside spilled onto the iron floor, spreading across the brass tanks and the labyrinth of pipes and guages and valves that dominated the

chamber. The seabird lay paralysed, its small heart thumping wildly in shock, its broken wings limp.

Something moved. An inhuman hand reached down and picked it up.

Half in the shadow and half in the light, the golem looked uncomprehendingly at the dying thing in his palm. His long fingers opened, accompanied by the soft sigh of metal on metal as the jointed rods that ran from fingertip to forearm slid against each other. He watched the seabird die in puzzlement, felt its heart stop beating through his thick and scarred skin.

For a time, he was motionless, gazing at the tiny body in his grip. Then he squatted down, and began to try and wake it up.

1.2

‘You ready?’ he asked, as they lay in the cramped and cold metal duct, looking through the grille to the room below. They had crawled through the darkness for what seemed like hours, and their elbows and knees were scraped and scuffed.

She could not keep a tremble from her voice. ‘Ready,’ she replied, and she reached across the distance between them, the patterned grille of the duct striping her thin arm in light, and clutched his wrist.

Their gaze met for the briefest of instants. Rail, dark-skinned, dreadlocked, his face obscured beneath his respirator. Moa, pale as milk, eyes smudged black and lips painted dark green. Then he looked away, and she let him go.

He drew a small cylinder from his satchel, unscrewed the top and tipped a few drops onto the rusty hinges of the grille. The hinges began to sizzle and melt, giving off a thin smoke that stank of acid. She licked her lips nervously, eyes flickering up and down the duct. He lifted the grille gently and laid it aside.

‘Let’s do it,’ he said, and he slipped through.

They lowered themselves down onto a beam, one of several that crisscrossed the room up near its ceiling. The beams were wide and made of some kind of material like ebony, which was somewhere between wood and metal but seemed to be neither.

The chamber beneath was heavy with shadow. Once it must have been grand, back in the time before the Forgetting; but now it smelt musty and mildew had settled in the corners. Curious shapes were sculpted into the walls, spirals and sprays and sea-shell patterns. Some of them glowed with a faint radiance, providing the light in the room.

There was junk everywhere: broken chairs, scraps of material, shattered bowls and a few gnawed bones. Human bones. Evidence of the new occupants of this place.

Rail hung from the beam and dropped the rest of the way, landing soundlessly on the floor. He reached up and caught Moa by the hips as she did the same, helping her down. There was a single doorway in the room, leading further into the building. They took it.

Rail went first, Moa followed. It was always the way, ever since they had met in the ghetto, all that time ago. Ever since he taught her how to be a thief like him. She had a natural talent for the craft, even though her conscience bothered her sometimes. Unlike Rail, she suffered pangs of guilt at the thought of taking what wasn't hers.

Not this time, though. This time, they were stealing from the Czel Surgos. Those monsters didn't deserve her pity.

They emerged at the top of a stairwell. It had been constructed so that it flowed downward in a loose half-circle, wood and metal and other substances that they could not identify moulded together like water. Parts of it were chipped now, and graffiti in some bizarre tongue had been painted across one wall. A globe of light hung unsupported in the air above the stairs. A marvel of ancient technology, now faded out of memory like the hands that had built this place.

So sad, Moa thought, distracted for a moment. So sad that there was once a time when the world was full of wonders like that. So sad that we forgot how to make them.

Rail hadn't given it a second glance. He was creeping down the stairs, listening.

There were voices below. Droning, muttered phrases which suddenly accelerated into high-pitched, squeaky chatter, as if someone had recorded a voice and was randomly

speeding it up and slowing it down, rearranging syllables in different orders, or playing it in reverse. The warped speech of the Czel Surgos.

Rail proceeded a little more slowly. He could hear them moving around below. Their footsteps slid from sluggish, heavy thuds to quick scampers and back again. He looked up the stairs at her and put his finger to where his lips would have been, if he had not been wearing his respirator. It was a muzzle of smooth black metal that fitted over his mouth, covering his face from the bridge of his nose to his cheekbones and chin, with two cables that ran over his shoulders to the small power pack that lay between his shoulder blades. Moa had rarely ever seen the features beneath, but that was only natural. Without his respirator, Rail couldn't breathe.

The footsteps and voices faded away as the Czel Surgos moved elsewhere. Rail mentally calculated his route, recalling the floorplan that they had been given by the thief-mistress Anya-Jacana. The building was massive. That would work to their advantage. There were only a few dozen of those creatures living here, and if they were careful then they could avoid them entirely.

He crept to the bottom of the stairs and looked up and down the corridor. It was dimly lit by overhead tracklights, its walls made of patterned metal that reflected the dull light strangely. Nothing moved.

Moa was behind him, at his shoulder. She practically radiated fear. She was pretending that this was all a game, an adventure like the ones she lived in her dreams; but she couldn't fool herself. Her heart was pounding against her ribs, sweat prickling her scalp.

Rail believed it could be done. That was what she held on to. Rail thought they could do it, and she trusted him. She took some of his calmness for her own. She thought of how he had reacted when she had expressed her doubts yesterday. *I'll look after you*, he had said. *I always look after you*. And that had been enough for her.

But Moa knew the kind of thing these creatures were capable of. This particular gang had been snatching people from the streets in this area for some time now. And those people got eaten. They only killed you first if you were lucky.

She put it from her mind. It was too late now. They had taken the job, and Anya-Jacana didn't like it when her thieves failed her. She got *very* angry. Moa never wanted to be on the receiving end of that. She was more afraid of Anya-Jacana than of the monsters in this lair.

Rail passed silently from the stairwell along the corridor, and Moa kept close to him. A distant jabber of speech startled them, but it quickly faded away. She brushed the straggling black fronds of hair from her face and looked around, searching for movement. This was not the same as dealing with slow-witted guards in some rich factory owner's house. They might not even see the Czel Surgos coming. These creatures could appear in the blink of an eye.

Rail peeped around the edge of a doorway, then ushered her through.

It was a small room, scattered with bits of debris and clearly disused. Something that looked like an operating table, contoured to the shape of a person's body, stood in the centre. Whatever had once covered it was greened with lichen. Recessed tracklights ran around the room in the corners where the ceiling met the wall. On the other side of the room was a metal door.

‘Through there,’ Rail whispered, motioning with his head.

Moa picked her way through a pile of old boxes, bent spokes and bits of slate to the door. She pushed it gently, but it did not give. A quick glance at the locking mechanism told her all she needed to know. Standard tripartite construction, meshing tumbler system. Easy.

From her pocket she drew out a pair of thin, serrated blades, and with them she began to probe around in the triangular keyhole. Rail kept watch on the corridor from the doorway.

Moa worked at the lock as quickly as she could, fiddling at the catches to release them one by one. Rail always left her to do the locks. She was better at it than he was; better, in fact, than almost every thief in the ghetto. There wasn’t a lock she couldn’t get through, except those old-style Functional Age locks that nobody understood and which didn’t use keys or bolts.

But this was a stubborn one. It hadn’t been opened for a long time, and it had rusted. She was only halfway through when Rail hissed quietly at her.

Something was coming along the corridor.

She squeezed her eyes shut, took a breath and carried on. She could hear it now, a dull thudding of footsteps, slow and ponderous. As if whatever made them weighed a ton. But they were already speeding up, becoming higher in pitch, turning into a mouse’s patter, coming closer.

They stopped. Not far away. Rail had retreated, and was by her shoulder, looking back at the doorway.

‘I don’t mean to hurry you…’ he muttered.

‘I know,’ she murmured. Her arms were shaking, but she forced her hands to keep still. She was on the last tumbler, and the frecking thing wouldn’t drop. If she could only…

There was a click as it came free, but as it did so another tumbler locked in place. An extra little bit of security. Moa breathed a curse.

They could hear a scuffing noise out in the corridor.

‘Moa…’ Rail whispered.

‘You’re not helping,’ she singsonged quietly.

She chewed at her bottom lip as she scraped at the tumbler with the tip of one of her blades, trying to work it loose. Visions of what was outside flashed through her head. She had never seen one of the Czel Surgos, but she had heard the stories. She willed the lock to open. It seemed determined to be awkward.

The footsteps began again. Heavy and deliberate. Coming along the corridor. Any moment, any moment now the thing that was making those noises would step into the open doorway. It would see them and it would all be over, everything would be over, it would…

The lock clicked. She pulled the door open, and shuddered as it squealed on its hinges. Rail was through in an instant, and she went after him, knowing that the game was up if the creature in the corridor saw them, not even thinking about what might be waiting on the other side.

She pulled the door closed behind her as they ran into a tiny storage room, piled with crates, some of which had split and were oozing nutrient gruel. Rail was already looking for the hatch, the one that they had seen in the floorplans. He knew as well as she

did that the Czel Surgos would have heard the sound of the door opening and would be coming to investigate. It was only a matter of time. But with these creatures, time was the biggest uncertainty. They might move faster than the eye could see, or so slowly that they appeared not to be moving at all. Moa could only hope, desperately, that fortune was on their side.

They ducked behind a pile of crates, and there it was: a metal trapdoor, half-hidden beneath a box that was leaking some sort of fibrous stuffing. Rail shoved it out of the way and pulled the trapdoor, expecting resistance; but mercifully it wasn't locked. Moa slipped through into the crawlspace beneath, and he followed, closing it just as he heard the door to the storage room open and the Czel Surgos come in.

'Go!' he hissed through his respirator, and Moa went, squeezing through the tight gap between the floors of the building. There were pipes here, and ancient mechanisms with a purpose they could only guess at, but there was light and enough room to wriggle.

They only relaxed when they came around the corner and the crawlspace opened out into a tiny chamber, full of dials and cables, all cold and inactive. They sat together on the hard metal mesh floor, letting their breathing slow. They did not think they had been seen, and the Czel Surgos was too big to get in after them anyway. There were some advantages to being small, with bodies lean from a lifetime of hunger. Nobody really counted weeks or months or years in Orokos, but both Rail and Moa were somewhere between children and adults, in that hazy area where adolescence occurred. In the ghetto, there was little time for childhood. They seemed older than their true ages.

After a time, Moa grinned at Rail. 'Close one,' she said.

Rail was grinning back; she could see by the creasing around his eyes.

‘Never worried for a second,’ he lied.