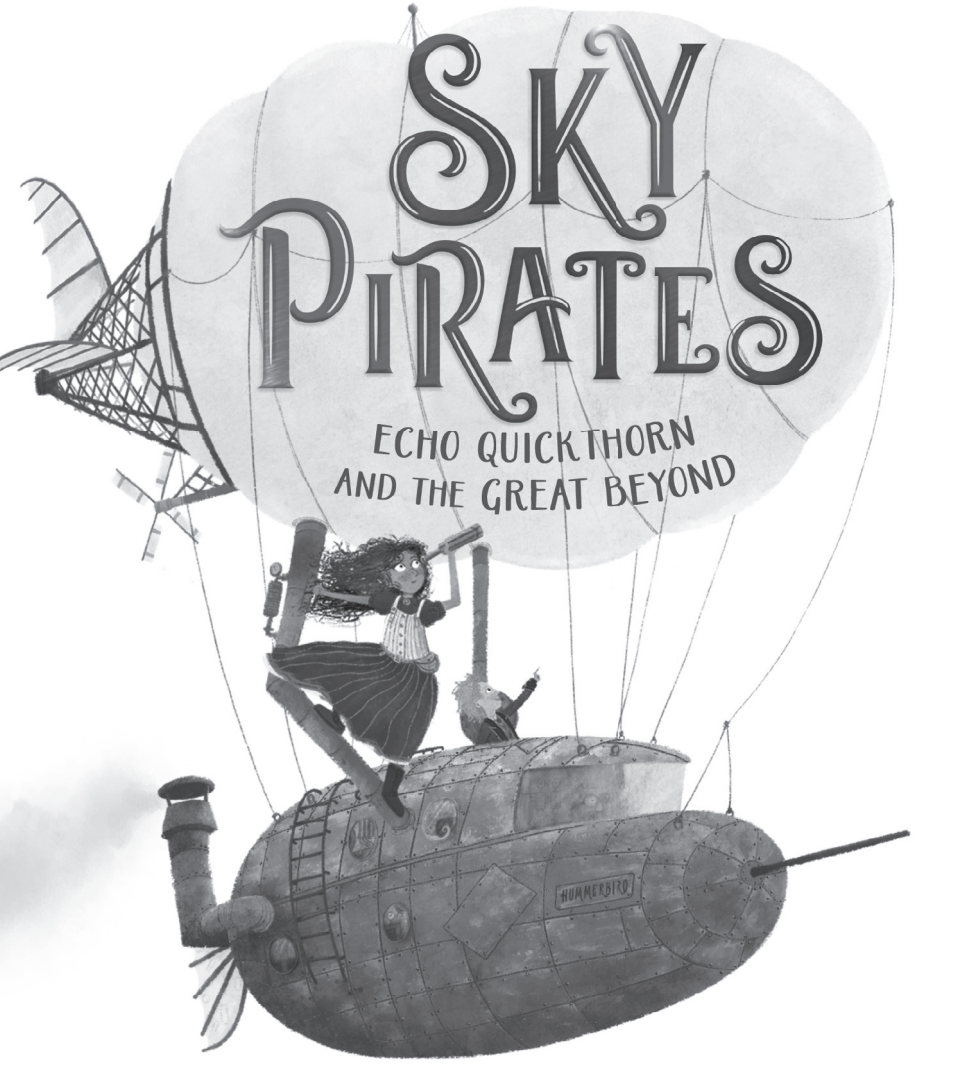


ALEX ENGLISH

SIMON & SCHUSTER

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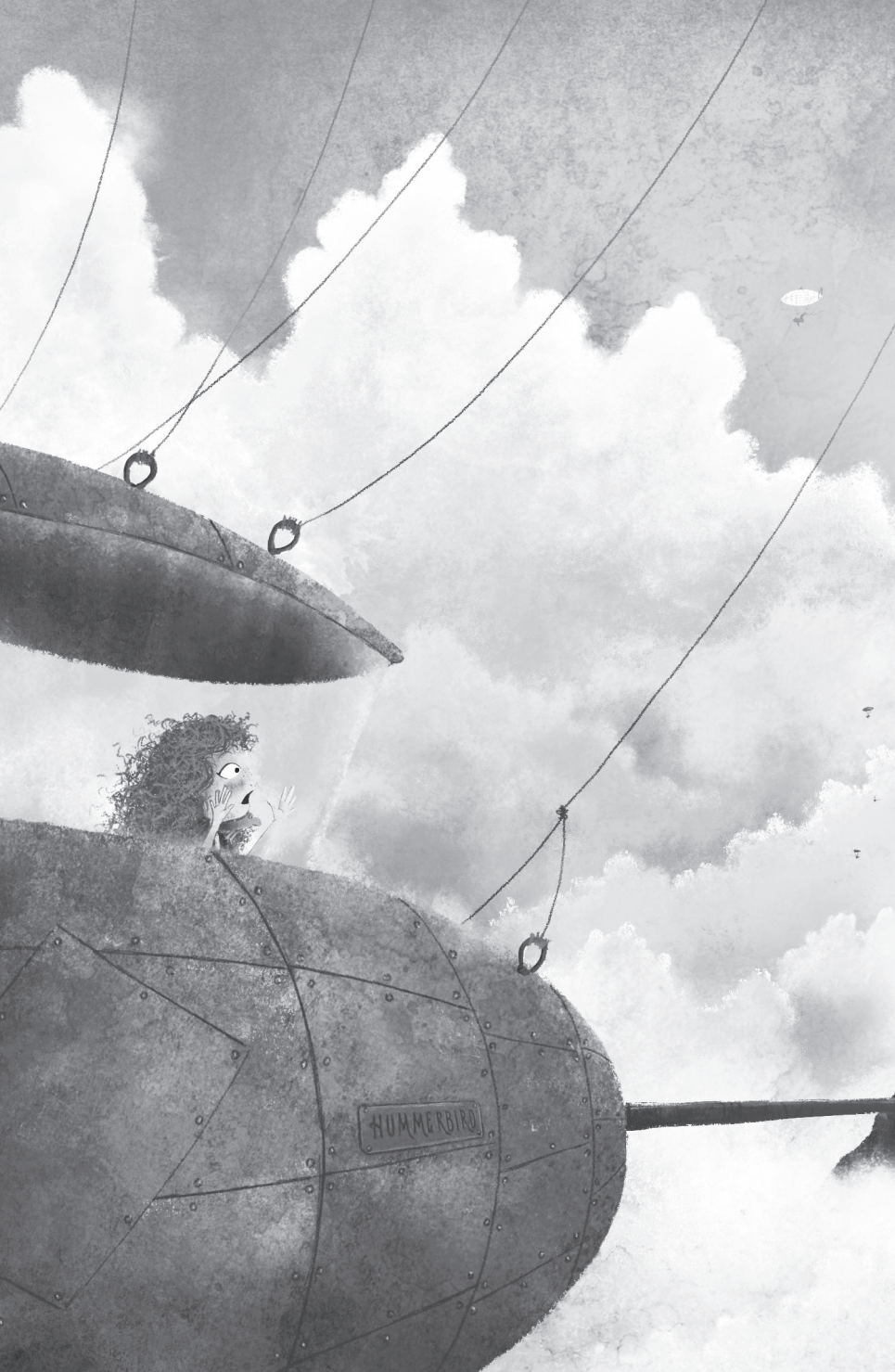


CHAPTER TWELVE

Echo woke before the others to find the airship humming its way steadily through a silvery-grey dawn. She climbed out of her hammock, moving a sleepy Gilbert on to her shoulder, and crept past Horace, softly snoring, and Professor Daggerwing, who breathed loudly, with his mouth hanging open. She settled herself into the pilot's seat, drawing her knees up to her chest, and stared out into the endless grey of the Barren and—

Echo gasped and leaped out of her seat. 'Gilbert, look!'

In the distance, through the hazy clouds, higgledy-piggledy rooftops formed a jagged silhouette against the rising sun. Towers soared into the sky, a wide arched bridge curved from east to west and above it all – could it really be? Yes, there were hundreds and hundreds of airships, as tiny as flies, hovering and darting through the air above the city. Was this it? Was this Port Tourbillon? She gazed, open-mouthed, unable to tear herself away.


HUMMERBIRD

'Oh, Gilbert, it's real,' she breathed. Somewhere, deep down inside her, she had always felt there was something missing. That she belonged somewhere else, but she had never dared believe it was really true. Some part of her had feared it would all – the airship, the professor, the hairpin – turn out to be an elaborate hoax, or a dream, or . . . She couldn't help grinning. But it *was* real. Port Tourbillon was there before her. And every inch closer they flew was an inch closer to finding out about her mother.



Echo wiped her eyes on her sleeve, before leaping out of her seat and running to shake the others from their slumber.

'Horace! Professor! I can see it! We're almost there!'

Horace flailed his arms, tried to sit up, twisted his hammock upside down and landed on the floor. 'What's wrong?' he spluttered. 'Are they shooting at us?'

'Look! I can see Port Tourbillon!'

Horace stood up and rubbed his bleary eyes, then went to the cockpit and squinted out. 'Where? I can't see it . . . Oh!' He froze and, for a moment, just stared. 'It's . . . it's another city,' he finally said.

'I know! Port Tourbillon! That's what we've been telling you this whole time. Here, take a look with the binoculars,' said Echo, passing them to him.

Professor Daggerwing swung his legs out of his hammock, leaped gracefully down and strode to the cockpit. 'Port Tourbillon indeed,' he said, gazing out of the windscreen and settling himself in the pilot's seat. 'And just in time for breakfast.'

Echo gazed out of the windscreen as a thousand multicoloured rooftops spread out before them. Smoke curled from chimney pots and early-morning light gleamed on roof tiles. Down in the streets she made out tiny figures darting back and forth, some of them on foot, some of them riding in strange horseless contraptions. And, everywhere above, airships flew. Huge great Zeppelins gliding grandly through

the sky, mid-size ships setting down and picking up deliveries, and tiny vessels even smaller than the *Hummerbird* buzzing here and there like bees at work.

'Isn't it wonderful?' Echo said, almost hopping from foot to foot in excitement. 'What do you think it'll be like?' She glanced at Horace.

'But, but that means . . .' He trailed off, dropping the binoculars on to their strap around his neck. 'But Father said . . .' He blinked a few times. 'It was all lies, wasn't it?'

Echo didn't know what to say to this. In her excitement to get to Port Tourbillon, she hadn't thought what it had all meant. But Horace was right: someone had been lying about it all. She took in his dazed expression. Horace had always believed his father so completely, it must be a huge shock. She gave his arm an awkward pat. 'I think it must have been,' she said softly.

The professor looked up from the controls. He cleared his throat. 'I'm sure your father had his own reasons for keeping this from you. Perhaps he was trying to protect you.'

'Perhaps,' Horace said, but his shoulders slumped and he sat down in silence, chewing his thumbnail.

Echo shook her head. If only Horace hadn't stowed away in the cupboard! She set her jaw. She would have to make sure the professor somehow returned him safely to Lockfort once this was all over. First though she had a mother to find.

Echo gazed out of the windscreen as they descended,

thoughts of Horace's predicament soon forgotten as she took in the sights below. Unlike Lockfort, with its identical low grey-roofed houses, Port Tourbillon was a jumbled mass of brightly painted buildings. Here a skinny townhouse in buttercup yellow jostled next to a wide indigo cottage painted with stars, while across the street a turquoise building with triangular windows and a spiralling turret leaned at a very peculiar angle indeed. No two houses were the same. It was as if a giant had crammed them in any which way, and then hurled his paintbox at them. Echo had never seen anything like it.

'Here we are – twenty-seven Hawthorn Square,' said the professor, pointing down at a skinny purple-painted building with a jumble of little white-framed windows and snaking copper drainpipes. 'My humble abode, where I will rustle us up some breakfast. I do hope the cats haven't given up on me while I've been away.'

'Cats?' said Horace, stirring from his silence.

'Cats,' said the professor. 'I have seven of them. An explorer's best friend, don't you know?'

Echo gave Horace a quizzical look. 'Isn't that . . . er . . . pickles?'

But the professor was too busy adjusting levers and turning dials to reply. He released the balloon pressure gauge, there was a low hiss and the airship began to descend gracefully towards the rooftop of 27 Hawthorn Square.

A prickle of excitement ran down Echo's spine, and she

hugged Gilbert to her chest. Port Tourbillon felt like a city where things happened. Where things would happen to her. Where she'd find answers.

She shook her head in awe, then felt a new stab of pity as she took in Horace's shell-shocked expression. There was a whole amazing world out here. Why had King Alfons ever wanted to keep this from them?



Once the *Hummerbird* was tethered to the rooftop landing dock, they descended through a hatch on the roof into the attic of 27 Hawthorn Square. Professor Daggerwing's house was just as skinny on the inside as it looked from the sky, with high ceilings and a multitude of small, boxy rooms spread over its five storeys. Echo loved it at first sight.

'Now, who's for breakfast?' said the professor.

Gilbert gave an enthusiastic chirrup from his foothold on Echo's shoulder.

'Me too,' said Echo, about to take the staircase down.

'Not that way,' said the professor, pulling a lever. 'The slideway goes directly to the ground floor. Avoids all those stairs, you see.'

There was a whirr of springs and a clank of metal parts and a trapdoor sprang open in the floor to reveal a dark hole.

'Follow me,' said the professor, grabbing a cushion from a pile and leaping into the opening, feet first, with a, '*Wheeeee!*'

Echo and Horace looked at each other with a shrug, then Echo took a cushion and jumped in too.

'Eek!' she squealed as she slid into a clear, curving tube that spiralled down the centre of the house. Room after room flashed by until she finally landed, giggling, in a huge pile of cushions. A few seconds later, Horace arrived with a *flump*.

Echo sat up and looked around. They seemed to have landed in a corridor in the basement. 'That was fun!' she said.

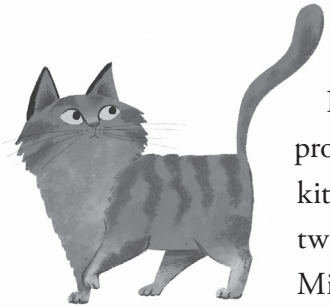
Gilbert shook himself and chirruped in a way that Echo was sure meant, *Let's do it again!*

Even Horace had a smile on his face as the professor took his hand and heaved him up. 'All my own invention,' he said proudly. 'I used to have a pulley system in both directions, but I decided sliding down was much more fun. The kitchen's this way.'

As they made their way to the kitchen, Echo couldn't stop staring at everything. What she really loved about Hawthorn Square was the homely messiness of it. There was no Miss Brittle here to tut or tidy. Every surface was covered with either paper or cats. Or sometimes paper *and* cats. There were diagrams, notes and maps. There were drawings and charts and newspaper cuttings. But most of all there were cats. All seven of them.

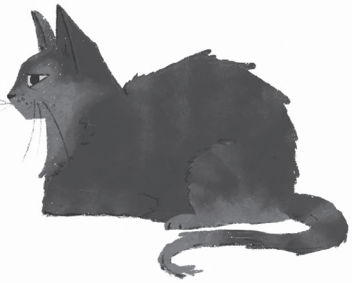


'May I introduce you to Beetlecrusher, Foxtrot, Dandelion, Sugarsnap,



Pumpernickel, Stargazy and Fred,' the professor said, when they arrived in the kitchen with a throng of purring, leg-twining felines. 'It seems the good Mrs Milkweed has been keeping you well fed and watered,' he said, as he stroked all seven mewing heads in turn.

'Ah, Professor! You're home!' Echo turned and goggled as a tiny woman with rainbow-striped hair and a huge, sparkling diamond in her nose appeared in the doorway. The woman's own eyebrows shot up when she spotted Echo and Horace. '*Children*, Professor?'



'Ah yes.' The professor fumbled for words. 'There was an occurrence. Well, an incident . . . a number of incidents in fact. Echo and Horace will be staying for a night or two. It's . . . ah, something of a long story.'

'Isn't it always?' The woman's eyes sparkled. 'I'm Meera Milkweed.' She thrust out a hand to shake Echo's and her armful of silver bracelets jangled. 'I'm the professor's housekeeper, cat keeper and sometimes cartographer.' She looked them up and down. 'I suppose, if you're staying, I'd better make up some beds.'



She disappeared out of the room in a whirl of colour.

'Now for breakfast,' said the professor, opening cupboards and examining jars.

Echo's eyes widened and she hugged herself in glee as she took in all the strange foods and spices that filled the professor's shelves.

'I really hope it's not pickles this time,' whispered Horace.

In fact, the kitchen *was* full of jars of pickles, stacked up to the ceiling in an array of colours. It seemed the selection in the *Hummerbird* was only the start. The professor had just pulled out an assortment of jars when Mrs Milkweed returned, carrying armfuls of sheets.

'Oh, Professor, you can't feed children on pickles,' she said, rolling her eyes in amusement at Echo and Horace. 'There's fresh wildeboar bacon in the larder. Now, you put these sheets on the top-floor beds and let me deal with breakfast.'



The four of them were soon sitting companionably at the large wooden table, tucking into huge plates of eggs, smoked wildeboar bacon and crisp, sugary waffles dowsed in hazel syrup. It was a world away from the bland coddled eggs and goblets of milk Echo and Horace were used to. The professor poured out generous mugs of tea for all of them, while explaining their adventures to Mrs Milkweed, who seemed to be used to tales of undiscovered cities, dungeons and daring

escapes. 'So,' he said, 'it'll take a couple of days to get the old *Hummerbird* fixed before I can take these two home.'

'If we can *get* home,' said Horace, staring glumly into his mug.

'The professor will find a way,' said Mrs Milkweed, patting his hand. 'There always is one, however difficult things seem. Now, what can we do to cheer you up in the meantime? There's lots to see in the city.'

'I don't know,' said Horace. He absent-mindedly broke off a piece of waffle and tossed it to Gilbert, who was sitting in the middle of the table, ready to nab any leftovers. Gilbert caught it with a snap and swallowed greedily.

'There must be something.' Echo wiped the syrup from her mouth with one of the professor's butterfly-print napkins. 'That's it,' she said. 'Butterflies! Horace loves butterflies, don't you?' She turned to the professor. 'You said you were on the way to study them before.'

The professor nodded sagely. 'Indeed, I was. The best butterfly country is out in the Violet Isles, but here in the city there is, of course, the Tourbillon Butterfly House, and the Great Library has plenty of reading matter.'

Horace brightened slightly and nodded. 'I suppose that does sound interesting.'

'Take a look at this.' Mrs Milkweed took down a worn purple book from one of the overcrowded shelves. 'This'll tell you about some of the varieties we have out here.'

Horace opened the book and immediately lost himself in its pages and Echo saw her chance to ask about the pin.

'I was wondering, Mrs M,' she said, casually nibbling on a waffle, 'if you've ever heard of somewhere called Evergreen and Spruce?'

'Want some jewellery, do you?' said Mrs Milkweed, jangling her bracelets with a grin. 'I get all mine from Ginshi Flux at the market. Tell her I sent you and she'll give you a discount.'

'No, I mean thank you, but I need to find that particular shop,' said Echo. 'I . . . I just want to look in the window.'

'I don't blame you! They've got some beautiful things, but they're pricey. You'll find it on Goldsmith's Lane.'

'Can you show me where that is?' asked Echo, stuffing the last piece of waffle into her mouth and jumping up from her chair. 'I'm going to go right away.'

Mrs Milkweed looked at her for a moment and cleared her throat. 'We'll have to get you kitted out first. Your clothes make you a bit . . .' She paused and searched for the right word. 'Conspicuous.'

Echo looked down at her crumpled golden silk gown. 'Oh.'

'And I think young Horace could do with wearing something more . . . practical too.' She turned to the professor. 'You'll need to go to the Mech Market to order a new envelope for the airship anyway. Why don't you get them some new clothes while you're there?'

'Clothes shopping?' The professor almost choked on his tea. 'But Mrs Milkweed, I hardly think—'

'Nonsense, Professor. These children rescued you. The least you can do is take care of them for a few days while they're here.'

'But I can't . . .' He trailed off in dismay.

Mrs Milkweed took his plate. 'If you can care for seven cats, Professor, then two children should be a doddle.'

'But I was hoping you would—'

'I'll be far too busy redrawing the map you lost. Now, off you go, all of you!'